THE BASTARD

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The

BASTARD

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The BASTARD

ERSKINE CALDWELL

Illustrations by
TY MAHON

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Helen, dear, this is for you!

I.

Chapter One

WHEN Gene Morgan had last heard of the woman who was his mother she was living a few hundred yards from the California border in the licensed prosperity of Old Mexico. She was young no more, nor was she now beautiful as she once had been. But she was experienced in the ways of men and of money, and she possessed a formula for increasing the fee which men were always eager to pay for her knowledge.

Gene knew, of course, that his mother was a harlot and that she had been following the races and race-track money for twenty-five years, and so when the stranger showed him the picture of his mother on the back of the postal card he was not surprised that it could be she. Tensely he absorbed the picture under the dim park lamp, the blood bulging the arteries in his neck and forehead. Licking his teeth with his tongue, the stranger recounted some of the things

that had occurred when they were together in New Orleans, Havana and Tia Juana. But Gene was not listening—he was looking with bloodclouded eyes at his mother's crudely made photograph. There were the red and blue scars sinking into her hips, the long knife-slash furrowing her belly like a drain ditch cut through a Louisiana swamp, and there too was her left breast nippleless where some drunken horseman had severed it with his teeth. It was she all right —whatever was her name. Was it Lou, now? Or was it Rosalind?

"Say," the stranger sneered, "what you looking at so long? That's nothing but a ——"

"Now, tell it!" Gene ground the order between his teeth, pushing the automatic under the man's belt. "Let's hear everything you know about her—and tell it straight! Get me? Come on, out with it! I want to know everything you know about her."

The stranger laughed deeply, casually pushing the pistol away.

"Put that thing up, kid—I was just looking for somebody to talk to. Sure, I'll tell you something about Old Pill. —And God knows I know enough about her!"

It did not take him long to tell his story, only an hour or so, and when he finished Gene was ready. While the man

was searching his pockets for a match Gene held the .38 under his left arm and fired three slugs of steel-jacketed lead into the stranger's lungs. There were several loafers on the riverwall at the other end of the park and Gene did not wait to see if he was dead. He threw the gun in the water and rolled the body to the river, kicking it over the wall. Even when it struck the water Gene could still hear the gasps that came from the throat.

"There was a pit about three feet deep and ten feet wide and there was a stunted little pony in the pit and she was down in there with the horse—"

Gene knew the whole thing by heart now. Not a word had escaped him. He knew every word and every word's inflection. He even remembered all the names his mother used: Norfolk Gertie—Denver Sal—Rose of Scranton—Big Butt Bessie—and the others. Then he began to think of the time when he had last seen her. It was in New Orleans on Canal Street—he followed her half the night without once speaking to her. He had wanted merely to see the woman who was his mother. And when toward morning she picked up a tow-headed seaman it was the last he had seen of her. The first time he was conscious of seeing her she was soubretting in a burlesque theatre in Philadelphia: in a hotel on Twelfth Street he spent the night with her, but

she did not know he was her son, or if she did know she didn't care. Anyway, twice was enough; he did not ever want to see her again.

"It cost five bucks to get in and as soon as the show was over the girls passed around a cigar box full of poker chips with numbers on them and then you pulled out one for your woman and No. 1 was——"

No one knew who was Gene's father. Gene did not know and he didn't care. He may possibly have traveled with the same carnival his mother was with when he was conceived—Gene didn't know. Perhaps his father was a stake-driver, maybe a barker; perhaps a hick sheriff, maybe a rednecked clodhopper; maybe a sailor, perhaps a preacher. But what was the use of thinking about it? Even his mother did not know—she was a hoochie-coochie dancer then doubling in the Forty-Nine, and she didn't keep books.

"That was for five bucks and if you wanted to you could pay another five spot and pick your choice out of three other ways—"

The man's words had made raw whelps on Gene's brain. He could not forget them, and he repeated the whole thing over and over, over and over until he thought he was going mad. And then he found himself singing the tale the stranger told. Everything, —street cars, motor trucks, foot-

falls, caught the rhythm and hurled it incessantly through his bursting head.

"She said she had twenty-seven men the Sunday night before—"

Nothing would stop the burning rhythm that surged back and forth in his body. He attempted to hold back the flood of thoughts by singing.

Twenty-seven men and Denver Sal . . . yo ho-ho and a barrel of gin—

Gene ran down an alley to a saloon. Plunging to the bar he poured five ponies of gin down his throat. It was raw, and it made him cough. Falling in a chair he shouted with all the power of his lungs to drown out the rhythm of his mother. Several men jumped on him and threw him through the door into the alley. Some women coming in laughed at him. Savagely, Gene kicked two of them in their stomachs. He tore the skirt from another. Screaming, they ran into the saloon.

Gene went back to the park and sat down on a bench by the riverwall. Three yards in front of him lay the river. Somewhere in it was a dead man. Gene began to sing and whistle. He had to drown the thoughts in his mind. The whelps on his brain became larger and larger with each throb of his heart. An open tap in his head

flooded his brain with his own hot blood. In an hour he began to feel better.

At midnight a park policeman ran him out, and Gene went back to the saloon in the alley. He was feeling much better.

The remainder of the night Gene spent soaking his brain in beer, and wondering how many brothers and sisters he had in the world: how many by his father, and how many by his mother.

II.

Chapter Two

GENE MORGAN'S mother gave birth to him during the heat of a Southern August on the little six by four platform in her hoochie-coochie tent half an hour after the last man had left the final afternoon performance. She cursed all the time she was in labor and the roustabouts had to tie her to a trunk to keep her from killing the baby with a stakemallet. She would have killed him sooner or later if an old negro woman had not offered to raise the child. That night the negress took him away to her home on the other side of the river. There she raised Gene in her cabin until he was eleven years old, and old enough to run away.

This village where Gene was raised had been named Lewisville in honor of some early pioneer. It was a sleepy cotton town now, and in general like hundreds of other places where cotton absorbed the blood of the white man.

Its population was about two thousand, three hundred white, the rest more or less black. Twelve hundred lived in the negro quarter and the other five hundred had bleached their skin sufficiently to permit them to live wherever in town they chose.

And now, dog-like, Gene returned to Lewisville to sniff and smell of the earth, the people, the trees, the streets.

Gene left the saloon, the poolroom and the murdered man mainly because he had to go some place. He knew it was foolish to stay there hustling pool and run the risk of being tracked down. He usually remained in a place six months or less. And so, with his stake money, he bought a ticket for the only home he knew.

When he arrived in Lewisville he went to the cabin where he remembered having lived, but the old negress was dead and the cabin torn down to make way for a cotton mill. He went to a rooming house.

There was a flour mill, an ice factory, a cotton mill, a cottonseed-oil mill, six or seven saw mills, and a planing mill in Lewisville now, and it was easy for a man to get some kind of a job. The first place he went he was hired. The employment clerk at the oil mill told him he could start to work that night. Eleven hours he was to work,

five and a half nights a week, at forty cents an hour. Out of that he had to pay eight dollars a week for his room and board.

Gene's job in the oil mill was to keep some of the feeding troughs running with cotton seed. Someone handed him a big sixteen-tine fork and told him to go to it. He soon found his job was man-sized. He had to scoop the fork full of seed, raise it over his shoulder, and throw the mass down to the feeding trough—and in it. The pitch was about ten feet, and sometimes workhardened negroes, between five and six in the morning, could not make the ten foot throw. It was mighty hard work. Even Johnson, the foreman, when he was in a good humor, admitted that much.

Johnson came through the seed shed an hour after Gene started to work and asked him his name. He was a brute of a fellow, big nosed and thick fingered. But then, a man had to be husky to handle the kind of men who worked in the Lewisville Cottonseed Oil Mill.

"Gene Morgan," he told him.

"Morgan, eh?" he repeated.

"That's what I said."

"Eugene Morgan," the foreman spoke into his finger-

printed little note book. Straightening up he asked: "Any kin to the Morgans here in town?"

"Christ, no!" Gene said emphatically.

"Where you from, then?"

"Came here from Pennsy.'

Johnson grunted something striding away, sliding out of sight down the seed bank. He was barely out of sight before the nightwatchman, a runt of a man who could easily pass for a dwarf, came up the seed bank with a hasty glance in the direction of Johnson. He carefully appraised Gene with his popping rabbit eyes before advancing.

"Hullo," he inquired cautiously through tight lips.

Gene, throwing cotton seed with all his strength, jerked his head in acknowledgement.

"New man, eh?" the nightwatchman stated knowingly, worming closer.

"Just started," Gene replied.

"I thought so. I know every man in the mill. —And for that matter, I know every man, woman and child in town, too. Specially the women, ha-ha."

Gene shoveled away at the mountain of cotton seed. No matter how hard he worked he couldn't make a noticeable hole in the pile of seed.

"Going to work here for a while, are you?"

"I may and I may not."

"Say, young fellow, what's your name?" the man asked.

"Morgan."

"Morgan what?" he continued, cupping his ear.

"Gene Morgan."

"Morgan . . . Eugene Morgan, eh?"

"That's right," Gene said looking at the watchman's yellow face. He was trying to find out if the watchman was merely an old man who liked to be friendly, or a police agent. He decided in the watchman's favor.

"Any kin to the Morgans here in town?"

"Hell, no."

"Say, young fellow, where you from?" he continued.

"Came here from Pennsy," Gene told him.

The man, his curiosity momentarily satisfied, picked up his punchclock and slid out of sight down the seed bank.

"Got to hurry," he called from below, "see you another round."

Gene worked away, sweating in the hot lint-filled air until his shirt and trousers were hanging like weights on his body. It was a new experience, this thing of working like a dirty laborer, but Gene liked it. It made him feel better all over.

The hum of the shafts, the slip slap-slap of the flying

belts, the grinding whine of the augering worms in the feeding troughs, and, above all, the steady rhythmic chuck-chuck, chuck-chuck-chuck of the steam exhaust in the power house made him relax.

For an hour or more he sang softly to himself, and all the time forking seed rhythmically:

My name is Morgan but it ain't J. P.,
There never was a bank on Stonewall Street
That ever belonged to me;
You sure have got my 'nitials wrong . . .
My name is Morgan but it ain't J. P.

During the midnight shutdown, while he was eating his lunch, two negro girls looked over the wall of cotton seed. Gene did not know anyone was near until he heard the faint sound of their whispers.

"Hello, Mister Man," one of the girls spoke cautiously when he turned around.

"Hello, yourselves," he called out in surprise, turning over for a more leisurely inspection of them.

"What's your name?" Gene asked the nearest of the negresses when they came over and sat down on the seed near him.

"Ethel."

"Ethel what?"

"Ethel Morgan."

"I'll be damned. . . . Any kin to the Morgans here in town?" he asked, thinking of Johnson and the night-watchman.

"No, sir."

Gene inspected them more closely in the silence, and they began to giggle foolishly.

"Say," Gene asked, raising himself on his elbows, "what do you kids do? Work in the mill?"

Giggling, they shook their heads vigorously.

Gene shut his eyes and tried to remember how long ago it was that he had last taken a girl. It was a long time, for Gene Morgan.

Ethel and her companion moved closer to where Gene lay on the seed.

"How much?" he asked, winking.

"Two bits," Ethel replied.

Gene finished eating his lunch and stretched out on the cottonseeds. The seed was soft and firm, moulding itself to his body.

He searched in his pocket for a coin.

"I'll flip the quarter," he announced, sitting up erectly. "Heads for Ethel and tails for you—what's your name?"

"Fanny Morgan."

"Good God!" Gene muttered, his eyes popping. Looking at the coin in his hand again he continued: "All right, then, heads for Ethel and tails for Fanny."

Gene glanced once more at Fanny before tossing the quarter in the air. Then looking first at Ethel he compared her to Fanny. The more he saw of Fanny the better he liked her. She was the lighter of the two, though both were mulatto. Fanny pleased him. While inspecting Ethel and Fanny he decided they were sisters: both of them had a peculiar arch of the eyebrows.

Gene spun the quarter in the air catching it between the palms of his hands. He glanced at the coin. It was heads up. Putting the money in his pocket he smiled at Fanny.

"Tails win," he announced, standing up stretching his arms and legs.

Ethel rolled down the cotton seed bank out of sight. She wore yellow garters around her legs.

Gene gave Fanny the twenty-five cent piece. She put it in her mouth smiling to the top of her orange-red gums.

III.

Chapter Three

NEXT to buying women the most popular pastime among the mill workers was shooting craps. Nearly every night there was a game somewhere in the mill and every man who had or who could borrow the money tried his luck. The nightwatchman was the first to tell Gene about it, or rather he was sent around to invite Gene, provided he had money of his own. Twenty-five, fifty and seventy-five cents was the usual bet on each turn of the dice, though bets were known to run as high as a dollar and two dolllars. But that was usually the night after payday.

Gene went around and found a good hard-boiled game running, the players crouching on the press room floor. Gene was accepted by a glance of the eye. No word was addressed to him when he edged in the circle.

"All right there, buddy," a redfaced gambler from the

engine room yelled across the floor when it was Gene's turn to roll the dice, "keep them babies hot or let somebody else have them."

Gene had the dice going but he couldn't suit everybody. They were playing against time. The whistle would put a stop to someone's winning streak.

"All right, Seed-boy," a big blackskinned negro cracked his teeth at Gene, "make 'em hit."

Oh, I was drunk last night and I was drunk the night before . . .

The game went on. Gene winning, losing, winning. Noise everywhere in the room, echoing and back-firing against the bags of pressed meal. Some men were whistling, some singing, many cursing. Those who sang and whistled broke off their songs whenever the dice stopped rolling, taking up the tune again when it was all over and another throw started.

The man squatting beside Gene gave him a drink out of a ginger ale bottle and started telling a tale, winning on the right, losing on the left but never breaking his sentences.

I'll take a left-handed gal every time. . . .

"It was one of those tough-looking joints where they

spit on your pants-leg if you don't watch out," the man began, "and when I asked the bird for a flopping place for about four bits that didn't have no bugs in it he takes the half-dollar and laughs a little to himself. 'You can take No. 12', he says to me and I goes up and gets in the bunk and lays there for about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour when I feels the damn dubs beginning to crawl around getting the kinks out of their legs. When they got to biting in their stride I struck a match to the mattress and hoofed it downstairs where this bird was who said there wasn't no bugs in the bunk. Well, I pulls down his little desk and grabs him around the neck and punches a calendar on his map. When I got through a lot of other birds had piled on and smoke was coming down the stairs and the cops were closing in. So they got me and took me in, but, by God, I cleaned out the bug-trap all right—it burnt to the ground, little red bugs all of them."

The dice circled twice before Gene got a winning streak. When it came the negro wanted to lay ten to one with Gene on his seven, and Gene took it only to have his pile cleaned out by the negro. Before he could lay another bet the one o'clock whistle blew and he was eight dollars loser.

"Tough luck, Seed-boy," the negro smiled, folding the

greenbacks in his pocketbook, "I'll let you take a crack at it tomorrow night."

"Don't worry," Gene grumbled, counting his money, "I'll see you double that next time, and I might double that."

Gene went back to work in the seed shed forking in the feeding trough. He was eight dollars loser but he did not mind that so much. He would get that back in a few nights, and a lot more in addition. He could make dice walk. Any dice. They did not have to be crooked. Hadn't he lived on better towns than this one for fifteen years without working for his money?

Being unaccustomed to working all night with his body Gene did not know how to make himself sleep when he got off from work in the morning. It was not a matter of sleep though as much as it was a question of holding his job if he did not sleep. He found it impossible to shut his eyes the first day after working all night and he lay around the stores until time to go back to work. That night he began to feel drowsy and dull-headed about ten. The foreman usually made one round every night, but no one ever knew what time he would make that one. Johnson wouldn't let anyone sleep on the job; that is, when he caught a man sleeping he kicked him out and there was no use trying to

get what back pay was due, because Johnson fixed that himself. Gene took a chance, and crawled off behind the seed bank at eleven. He slept till one, the whistle waking him. He felt better, and so long as Johnson had not caught him it was all right. The next morning, though, he went to sleep as soon as he got in the bed at the rooming house.

Every night the crap games went on, lasting a full hour, lunches being swallowed while the dice were rolling. The nightwatchman always played, but his was a cautious game. No wild betting for him, and no odds given, though of course he took all that were offered him if they were better than two to one. Consequently he always took out more money than he brought in the game. He was like a fifty cent kitty in a twenty-five cent game, for his winnings were deposited in a savings bank and never came back.

There are more ways of getting money from men than by throwing dice for it, and Gene knew about lots of them.

IV.

Chapter Four

As soon as the midnight whistle blew Gene threw down the heavy seed fork and went to the pumphouse for a drink of water. The lint of the seed shed had not only filled his throat but his lungs also were clogged. Air and water was the only remedy provided by the owners of the mill for the workers in the shed. Leaving the pumphouse Gene went out into the airway where the air was at least free of lint.

Sitting with his back to the pumphouse Gene ate his lunch quickly and closed his eyes. He was soon asleep, but only for a few minutes. He awoke with a jump and pulled out his watch. It was only half after the hour. Across the airway, sitting on a bench against the press room wall, the nightwatchman ate his lunch silently with his head bent over the little straw basket. Gene rubbed his eyes and was getting up to go over and talk to the man when he hap-

pened to see that someone was sitting with him. The yellowish lights from the mill windows beamed diagonally across the airway, falling on the little man with the popping rabbit eyes. Sitting outside the flood of light was the other person. Shading his eyes with his hands Gene could see plainly the woman who sat beside him. Undoubtedly she was the watchman's wife. However, she was younger than her husband, possibly twenty years or more.

All the time she had been looking across the airway toward Gene, and now her husband was asking if she fed the chickens before they went to roost. She answered him with a nod of her head, her eyes straining through the darkness toward Gene.

Five minutes or more passed and she was still looking at Gene. The pupils of his eyes had opened in the darkness and he could now see her as plainly as he had first seen the watchman in the mill light. She was staring at Gene now, and Gene stared back at her defiantly. Their eyes electrified the cool night air.

The woman was no longer conscious of her husband's presence. Anyway, when he spoke to her she answered him sufficiently without taking her gaze from Gene. Her eyes were like stars, absorbing the reflected yellowish mill light

and flashing a greenish white path through the dark midnight air.

Nervous to the tips of his fingers Gene watched her like prey. Presently, while her gaze remained unbroken, she recrossed her legs slowly and deliberately. Gene shifted the weight of his body uncomfortably. The woman had crossed her legs loosely: her knees were no longer pressed tightly together, and her skirt had been drawn beyond her knees. Gene gathered a handful of small gravel and threw one—two—three—four—five—six—seven—, a dozen of the small stones across the airway at her. Evidently one or two of them struck her, for she smiled and again recrossed her legs. And again she drew back her skirt.

And then the nightwatchman took her away.

The following night Gene timed his arrival at the pumphouse with only a few seconds to spare. The whistle blew while he was drinking. Outside in the airway he sat down beside the pumphouse and lit a cigarette quickly. As he had hoped, the nightwatchman in a few moments came up the airway followed by his wife. She looked eagerly toward the pumphouse, and Gene sucked nervously on his cigarette cupping the glow with his hands. They sat down on the bench, and the man began eating his lunch immediately. Gene threw several pieces of gravel at the woman, and she

in turn recrossed her legs twice in quick succession smiling eagerly at Gene. When the watchman finished his lunch they got up from the bench. While he was closing his basket and taking out his watch, she quickly put her hands to her head as if rearranging her hair, and in doing so the cloak that had been drawn tightly around her body fell open. Gene could see plainly that she wore no other outer clothing. For thirty seconds or more she stood there immobile, her round white body gleaming in the pale yellowish light from dingy windows of the mill like a statue suddenly unveiled in the airway. She smiled at Gene, watching the movements of her husband from the corner of her eye. When he was ready to leave she gathered with a single motion the folds of her cloak. Side by side they disappeared from sight around the corner of the mill, a series of glances over her shoulder a parting message to Gene.

Gene went back to the seed shed and began forking cotton seed frantically. He had been at work for ten minutes or more when the one o'clock whistle blew. But it didn't matter to Gene, for the nightwatchman's wife had excited him as few women had ever done before. Even now he was planning his action for the time when he would have her.

The watchman returned from his one o'clock rounds

and climbed up the seed bank. Neither of them spoke for several minutes. The man with the leather-encased clock over his shoulder was the first to break the silence: Gene would never have trusted his voice to that task. The night-watchman smiled through his tight little lips, his rabbit eyes almost popping from their sockets.

"Working pretty hard, young fellow," he commented, continuing to laugh through his tight lips.

Gene watched him from the corner of his eyes, nodding in agreement. Just then he would have agreed to anything the man could have suggested.

Again he spoke: there was something he could no longer hold within himself.

"Know how to keep your mouth shut, young fellow? I guess you know what I mean."

Gene was jerked to rigid erectness by the electrical power in the words.

"Sure," he replied uncertainly, his eyes filling with bluish veins.

"Well, I've got a friend coming along in a few minutes and if anybody comes around I want you to whistle. You have to play safe around this place, you know."

"Sure," Gene promised, his voice breaking huskily with

relief. The expression was saturated relief. He squeezed it. "Sure. I know how it is."

The watchman looked vacantly at Gene. In the silence, save for the chorusing noises of the mill, Gene was wondering if he had been mistaken in believing the woman in the airway was the watchman's wife. But like the man standing in front of him Gene was going to play safe: he would keep his mouth shut until he knew the situation better.

The watchman sat down near one of the open seed windows at the unloading platform. He waited only a few minutes for the visitor, and together they came up through the crater. Gene forked seed as they passed him, but he forked slowly in order to see the woman. She was not the woman he had seen in the airway, though, and he was glad.

The woman was about thirty years old, six or seven years older than the other woman, and her face was so ugly it was hideous. Apparently the watchman was unconcerned over her face, for his arms were around her hips, reaching for her body.

When she had gone the nightwatchman came back from his two o'clock rounds to thank Gene.

"You can't be any too damn careful around this mill, young fellow. There's too damn many of these guys here snooping around to see what's going on. Why, only a little

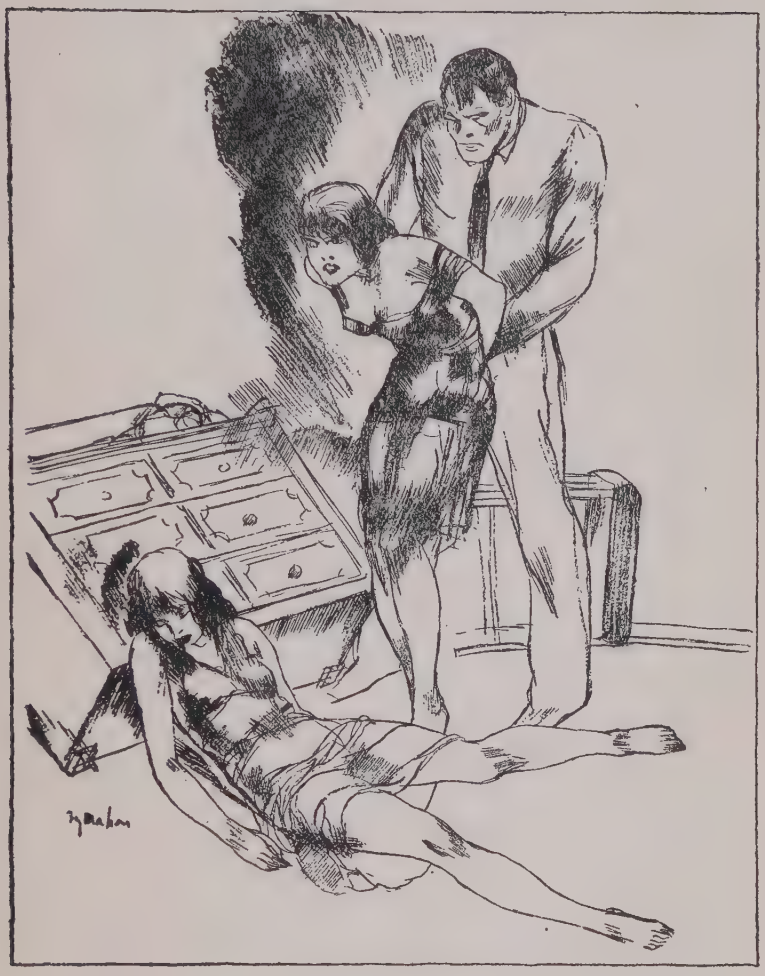
more than a week ago one of the men down in the meal room caught his wife down in the lower end of the seed shed yonder with a cracker, and I thought there was going to be hell to pay going and coming. Yes, sir. But anytime I can help you, young fellow, just let me know and I'll return the favor the best I can. No, sir, you can't be any too careful around this mill when it comes to having women call on you."

"I don't know any women around here, though," Gene told him. "I work all night and sleep almost all day, and you can't get women that way."

"Don't you worry about that, young fellow," the man assured Gene confidentially, "don't you worry about that at all. The women in this town run the men down. They'll come. Just wait and be ready when they do. I know. And you just wait and see if what I'm telling you ain't God's own truth. They'll come."

Gene looked at him, thinking about his wife in the airway.

"The foreman's wife," the watchman announced in a hoarse whisper, his eyes popping and his thumb jerking in the direction which the woman had departed, and laughing through the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. "Not bad, either, not at all bad."



V.

Chapter Five

NOT again that week did the nightwatchman's wife come to the mill, although Gene watched and waited patiently and hopefully in the airway now bringing his lunch with him each night. Gene was every night between twelve and one. Her husband was becoming not only impatient at the delay, but nervous as well. Heretofore when he wanted a woman he took her without having to wait for her several hours or several days. He decided, if he discovered that the watchman's wife was a teaser, that he would make her suffer for causing him the pain of waiting for her. But, after all, he couldn't do anything about it until he saw her alone.

The next time Gene saw her husband he asked him his name. He wanted to insure his possession of his wife in case anything should happen to him before she came to the mill again. And to do this he had to know her name.

"Oh, just call me Froggy," he answered cryptically. "That's what everybody in town calls me."

"Froggy. . . . But what's your real name?"

"Hell, ain't Froggy good enough to satisfy you? I'll answer to that any time you holler."

"Sure, but suppose somebody was to come along and ask me where you're at? . . . Suppose a woman was to come along and ask me? And if I didn't know nobody what worked in the mill by that name I'd have to tell her so, wouldn't I? Then you'd be in a hell of a fix, 'specially if you was expecting a woman to come around to see you, see?"

"Christ, young fellow, I believe you are right about that part of it. That may happen just any time. You never can tell about those things. Women are funny beings, anyway, and you can't always tell just what they'll take it in their heads to do. . . . Why, once when I was working over to the cottom mill a woman went around asking everybody where I was at and nobody knew who she was talking about. No, sir, you never can tell about those things, young fellow; especially when it's a woman who has taken a special liking to you. . . . My name is Fuller: Ben L. Fuller. Everybody in town knows me: men, women and children—'specially the women, ha-ha."

Gene would not forget that. The name was on his mind

never to come off; that is, it would not come off before he had had Mrs. Fuller until he was tired of her.

"Look here, young fellow," Froggy said excitedly, "you're such a smart one I'll let you in on a little secret. You know how to keep your mouth shut, don't you?"

"Got any money on you tonight?" he asked preliminarily. "Got as much as a dollar or two on you now?"

Gene suspected that Froggy wanted to borrow, but he admitted, reservedly, that he had a dollar or two; possibly four or five if he wanted it himself.

"Then listen here: there's a carnival down in town this week, see? And we got together here in the mill and engaged a hooch dancer for a little private performance up here in the shed. It's all going to be strictly private, you understand, and all that. And if you like her looks you can maybe spend another dollar on her down at the other end of the shed yonder. How's that strike you?"

"Sure, I'll take a look at her. When's it coming off?"

"Hell, man, tonight. Twelve sharp in the front of the seed shed yonder."

"Sign me up for a little of everything. I'm good for it."

The watchman picked up his punchclock and slid down the seed bank. From below he called up to Gene:

"A little hooch, you know—that's the first thing. The rest comes later. She's a good looking puss, they tell me."

At the first blast of the midnight whistle Gene threw down his fork and dashed toward the front of the shed. He was there on time, but he was not the first man there by several yards. Already a dozen men were perching themselves on the seed oval, already impatient at the delay. Down in the mouth of the crater, where the cotton seed had been scraped from the floor, stood the woman who was to furnish the body for the dance and the body for the men. Standing there in the centre of the circle of men she was the target for handfuls of cotton seed and the vulturous words from their mouths. Over her body she wore a thin cloth of orange silk. Under the garment rose swelling thighs and unstillable breasts. She was talking to one of the several men beside her, her words broken under the pelting shower of flying cotton seed. Gene slid down the seed bank to the bottom of the pit and sat with his feet on the floor and his hands between his legs.

By now twenty-five or thirty men had arrived, and more were coming. Presently Froggy sat down beside Gene.

Digging his elbow into Gene's ribs Froggy commented knowingly on womanhood in general.

The man who had been talking with the woman turned

around and faced the men who were perched like so many buzzards on the cotton seed.

"All right, you cotton pickers, fork out your jack and the show will start right off. A dollar a head. Throw your jack down here. . . . There ain't going to be no deadheading tonight like there was last time."

Gathering the paper and silver in her hands the woman filled her armbag with the money. When all was safely in the bag she placed it beside her on the floor where she could watch it. And then she undressed by lifting over her head the orange-colored silk shift. Even before she was nude the shed was in an uproar, and by the time she had thrown the garment beside her pocketbook the din was headsplitting. She smiled forcedly around the circle and began her hip dance. The motions and effect were purely sensual, studiously calculated to inflame the lust of the men. The woman was an accomplished dancer it was quite evident, and placed amidst finer surroundings she would no doubt have achieved with the motions of her hips and breasts an effect not quite as crude and obscene.

On the floor of the pit as she was, there was no suggestion of beauty or rhythm beyond that which is created by the actual indulgence of artificially generated lust. What her own thoughts were during her dance no one who sat

before her did know. She herself had no desire for the men because she knew their sole object was to be incited and then relieved of their pent emotions. They paid her for what they desired, while she was unable to desire them. Her husband was the only man who ever penetrated to the depths of her love.

The dance went on. The men moved closer to her as if drawn by chains around their necks, crowding around her to touch her body with their thick fingers and to rub their hands over her skin. She was paid for this, the same as they were paid to fork cotton seed, press it and tank the oil. She was working at her job now, the same as they would be doing an hour later at theirs.

The woman's dance was nearing its climax. Her motions were slower, jerking to an end. The chain necklace around her neck swung a small white gold locket like the pendulum of a clock from breast to breast. She was on her hands and knees now and the necklace hung plumb to the floor. Her hips were almost stilled and her breasts stretched quivering toward the floor. In the midst of the groans and grunts of the men, while the end was only a few seconds away, the locket fell open at its clasp, fluttering to the floor several miniature photographs. One fell face up on the pine floor. It was the face of a small child looking up

at the woman over it on her hands and knees. The dance was over.

"All right, young fellow," Froggy said pulling at Gene, "let's run for it. We'll get near the head of the line."

The crowd of men had broken and they were now running wildly across the cotton seed to the north end of the shed. The woman picked up the small discs that had fallen from the locket and replaced them unemotionally. Afterward she rose to her feet and threw her cloak around her, and picking up her pocketbook went behind the men, walking slowly. The features of her face were immobile.

The men had formed in a long waving line and were impatiently waiting for the woman to appear. When at last she came there was fighting among the men over their places in the line, and above all the shouts directed at the dancer.

"You're younger than I am, young fellow. You get ahead of me. And you had better have your dollar ready in your hand or you will get pushed aside and have to wait till last. I remember once when we had a woman from a Forty-Nine up here and we was all lined up, the man who was third in line couldn't get his dollar out of his pocket in time and the men behind pushed him—"

The line closed up.

VI.

Chapter Six

ONE of the first boys of his own age Gene met was John Hunter. They played pool one Saturday night, neither one knowing the other at the time. And after that they gambled a lot together, played pool, and went together in search of women. In a few weeks Gene had moved his things to John's home, where he boarded during the remainder of the time he lived in Lewisville.

Even when John Hunter was a tiny little fellow his father used to take him over to Sook Robinson's every Saturday night to stay over Sunday. Old Jim Hunter—Sheriff Jim, everybody called him—was John's father. They lived at that time about a mile and a quarter east of town in a little two-room slab shack on a sandhill behind Sheriff Jim's sawmill on Dirty Gut Creek. John's mother, Sheriff Jim's fifth wife, died the same day he was born.

Sheriff Jim always shut down the sawmill at twelve o'sun on Saturday and, when he had enough money, paid off the negro hands. After the negroes had left for town he would warm over six or seven slices of fat-back and call John in the shack for dinner. They generally had several cold flap-jacks left over from breakfast to eat with it. And if Sheriff Jim wasn't feeling too tired, and if it wasn't too hot, he boiled a little sassafras tea.

After he finished eating his dinner Sheriff Jim always stretched out on the floor for about an hour's resting, John sitting on the block step at the front door waiting until his father was ready to go into town. Sheriff Jim and John each put on a clean blue denim shirt before they left home, and Sheriff Jim got a shave every Saturday afternoon at the barber shop.

About supper time they went down to Sook Robinson's. There they lay around Saturday night, all day Sunday, and Sunday night. Sook was crazy about John, and she fixed up a little room for him in the attic. In the summer time it was pretty hot up there, so John slept alone. In the winter, though, during November, December, January and February Sook had one of the girls sleep with John in the big feather bed by the brick chimney.

As John grew older he would not let anyone but Flo

sleep with him in the attic. He liked her lots more than he did anyone else in the house. That is, of the girls. John liked Sook of course best of all. But Sook slept with Sheriff Jim and Sheriff Jim would not let John get in bed with them. Sook didn't like Flo very much herself. Flo was too young, she said. And Sook frequently got angry at her and kicked Flo out the front door, but she invariably changed her mind before Flo was out of sight up the street and called her back. Flo brought a bag of candy to bed with her every Saturday night in the wintertime.

"Flo ain't worth a good God damn!" Sook would yell with her throaty voice at the other girls. "Now, look at that Bess! She's the best girl in the house. She makes five times more money for me than that God damn good-for-nothing Flo!"

Sook used to carry on like that about Flo for hours at a time, but she kept Flo on John's account. She knew it would break his heart if Flo was run off. Every night when she got in bed Flo was whimpering a little. She never cried out loud. She did not want to disturb John. And Flo was not a day over fifteen then. She wasn't anything but a kid.

When John was twelve, during Christmas week, when business was rushing as Sook would say, he and Flo were talking long past midnight when Sook came up and told

Flo to go downstairs. A big crowd of men from the woods had just come in, and Flo had to go. It was nearly five o'clock before she came back to bed. John heard her crying all the way up the steps. She thought he was asleep.

"What's the matter, Flo?" John asked her as soon as she opened the door.

"I've got enough of those buzzards perching around this house," Flo cried miserably through the thin veil of words. "It wouldn't take much to make me leave Sook. I don't mind decent men, but I can't stand to have those dirty buzzards roosting on me like that, John!"

John kissed her.

"Why can't they all be like you, John?" she whimpered.

"I'll tell you what we can do," John urged. "Let's go off and get married when I'm a little older. How would you like that, Flo?"

"I'll go away with you, John, any time you want me to go," she promised, her eyes sparkling with happiness through her tears, "but I can't marry you. I'll live with you as long as you want me to, but I can't marry you, John."

"Why can't you, Flo?" he pleaded.

"Because."

"Don't you want to?"

"John, you know I do!"

"Why can't you, then?"

"Because," she said.

"Because, why?"

"Because. . . . Sook's ruint me. You don't want a girl like me for your wife. You should marry a good girl, John. And I'm too old—you want a new girl, John. I'm lots older than you are, too.

"Flo, I don't care about that—I love you."

"Yes, you would too, sometime. You wouldn't like a used girl like me very long. You want your wife to be new, John. I know."

At dawn both fell asleep in each other's arms. After that night they never talked about that again.

Then one Saturday night John came and Flo had gone away. Sook said she went away one night without telling anyone. Flo never came back. And John wouldn't let Sook put any of the other girls in the attic with him during the rest of the winter.

The following winter though, as soon as the nights began to be cool and chilly, a new girl began sleeping in the attic with John in the feather bed. Her name was Rose. John liked Rose all right, but he still remembered Flo and hoped she would come back soon. Rose and John were nearer the same age. John was almost fourteen then and

Rose was just fifteen. He and Rose got along fine together from the start, for John was beginning to feel like a man by that time and Rose had entered womanhood with him.

When the county election was held the following autumn Sheriff Jim was elected sheriff. Everybody was surprised. Sheriff Jim had been running for the office fifteen or twenty years unsuccessfully. Some years he would fail even to secure nomination in the primary, and then at other times he would trail the winner in the fall election by a handful of votes. Everybody was surprised, but almost everyone was glad. He deserved the office, they said, after all these years. Sheriff Jim was now Sheriff Hunter, but everybody continued to call him Sheriff Jim, and promised to vote for him again in the next election.

When he was sworn into office he turned the running of the saw mill on Dirty Gut Creek over to John. Sheriff Jim was making a lot of money from his mill then, and he built a big ten-room house in town.

On Saturday nights Sheriff Jim went down to Sook Robinson's, and occasionally Sook came up to the house during the first part of the week, when business wasn't rushing as she said, and stayed two or three days at a time. Sometimes Sook cleaned up a little when she felt like it. She washed the windows and the floors, and so on. And when she was

feeling unusually good she baked a weeks' supply of bread, and at supper that night had two or three pans of hot rolls for Sheriff Jim and John.

A little while after that Rose began coming up to the house every week or so, spending the night with John. And one evening near the end of summer she brought her suitcase and told John she didn't want to go back to Sook's again. John was hoping Flo would come back, but he told Rose she could stay if she wanted to.

Sook never did try to run her back. Rose wasn't worth her board and keep, she told Sheriff Jim.

Several times that winter John forgot and called Rose Flo, but Rose told him she didn't mind. She even said she would leave if Flo ever came back. But Flo never did.

VII.

Chapter Seven

IT was at least a month after he moved to Sheriff Jim's that Gene first saw Sook. Sheriff Jim had gone to Atlanta—on business, he said—the week before. No one knew when he was coming home and nothing was thought about it until the following Sunday night when Sook, not waiting to turn the knob, burst open the door shattering the lock like a sledgehammer. Gene, Rose and John were eating supper, and knocking aside chairs and tables as if she were in a child's playhouse, Sook went straight to the dining room. She advanced on John, ignoring Rose and Gene. Rose was sure it was something about Sheriff Jim. Sook did not love anyone else in the world.

"Where's that low-down son of a bitch!" Sook shouted preliminarily at John.

"Who the hell you talking about, Sook!" John angered.

"You know whom I mean! Where's he at?" Sook shouted high-pitched.

"Sheriff Jim!" Rose, muffling her voice, whispered.

"Cut out the rough house, Sook," John commanded, rising to his feet. "Who do you want to see?"

"Be careful," Rose whispered in Gene's ear, "she's sleigh-riding. If she pulls a gun on John hit her across the head with a chair."

"You know God damn well who I'm looking for!" she shouted fiendishly. "I'm looking for that blue bellied bastard what went off and got married without me knowing nothing about it! Where's he at? Say!"

Sook advanced menacingly in long strides. John sank in his chair.

"Has Sheriff Jim come home yet? —Don't lie to me, John, 'cause I don't want to have to kill you. But if you tell me a lie, so help me wife of Christ, I'll blow your God damn guts to hell and back for a July barbecue!"

From the pocket of her jacket Sook jerked an automatic revolver and flourished its blue steel while tapping her toe for an answer.

"He's not back yet, Sook, I swear to God," John pleaded tremblingly.

"Do you know when he's coming home?— Don't lie to me, John! I can send your soul to hell a damn sight quicker than you can tell a lie to me!"

"I don't know, Sook. He didn't say when he was coming back."

Sook believed him. The tension snapped. The blood drained her face blue. Rose knew how to care for Sook when she was eating snow, so she went over and made Sook sit down in a chair by the table.

Still no one spoke: the automatic still lay in her hands. Gene breathed heavily. He had seen some wild ones in his lifetime, but Sook came very near taming them all.

Rose made Sook drink a cup of coffee, taking the revolver from her hand and laying it on top of the cupboard in the corner. John and Gene went on with their supper.

Rose gave Sook another cup. The drug showed no further signs of wearing off yet, but the coffee would help it some. Her eyes were ablaze yet with yellow flames. Sook consumed the coffee black and hot without sugar.

It was up to Sook to do the talking. After five minutes, when the drug was losing some of its force, she began:

"One of my girls just got back from Atlanta and she said she saw Sheriff Jim and he was married."

Sook looked around for a comment from someone.

"Good God, Sook!" John said, sitting up, "What made him go and do that?"

"God knows. I don't. . . . Sheriff Jim is too old to go and

get married. It won't do him no good now. He ain't got no manhood left in him. I know. Ain't I bedded him every week for the past twenty years or more?"

"And he went and got married to something he found up there in a hotel. . . . God knows what he did it for. It won't do him no good to get married. He's too old to be getting a woman all to himself like that . . . "

Tears dripped from her eyes to the blue oilcloth and sobs shook her breasts. The cocaine was entering a final stage.

"Poor old Sheriff Jim—some God damn little hustler up there got him tight and got married to him so she could get all his money. —Just wait till she comes down here! I'll cut out her God damn guts and make her eat 'em without salt and pepper! Why, poor old Sheriff Jim. . . . He ain't nothing but a boy, and some God damn little hustler got him married to her. . . . How old is your poppa, John? Let's see: two years ago he told me he was sixty-eight, if I remember right—that makes him seventy this fall. Poor old Sheriff Jim—Just wait till that barebutt comes down here and then you'll see a sight! I'll fill her so full of lead it'll take ten big men to roll her in her grave! Them God damn hustlers up there in Atlanta make me—"

"I wouldn't do that, Sook," Rose advised. "It won't do

no good now. We'll run her off some way. We'll scare her: tell her Sheriff Jim's wife is coming home, or something. She'll hot-track it back to Atlanta."

Sook helped herself to some chicken stew. Rose poured another cup of coffee for her and John lit her a cigarette. She was all right now.

After everyone had finished eating Sook took notice of Gene for the first time.

"Who's the kid?" she asked John, informally pointing her fork at Gene.

"Who do you mean? Gene? Hell, he ain't no kid; he's older than me."

"Gene?"

"Gene Morgan."

"Christ! Are you old man Morgan's boy he's always yapping to me about?"

"What Morgan?" Gene asked contemptuously. "Hell, I ain't got no old man what I know of."

"I'd swear you was one of these Morgans here. You favor the old man a little. Don't he, John? It's too bad you ain't his kid, he's got about a million salted away. He told me he was saving some of it for that fool boy of his who's away somewhere."

"How about lending me about ten thousand, Gene," John laughed.

"Oh, yes," Sook broke in, leaning across the table, "I know who you are now. I've been hearing all about you off and on for three or four weeks past. You're the one what's got all the women in town spinning on their tails like a flea-bit dog, ain't you? Sure, I know all about you now. You work down at the oil mill on the night shift, don't you?"

Gene nodded, mystified.

"Sure, you're the one. A man was down to the house the other night raising hell about you. He said he was going gunning after you if you didn't lay off his wife. Sure, you're the one. Reckon you know who I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Somebody else. It ain't me. I don't know no women in this lay-out yet."

"It's you, all right. I know. This man said his wife was following you all around town, and that you worked on the night shift down to the oil mill, and that you'd just come to town a month or two ago. It's you all right. But listen, you'd better watch what you do around here. And if I was you I wouldn't fool with no women in the daytime around this town—not no married women anyway.

I've seen more than one gunning party around this place since I've lived in Lewisville."

"Better lay low, Gene," John advised, seriously.

"Come on down to the house some night," Sook said, big-heartedly, "I'll fix you up."

"Thanks," he said, winking at Rose, "I'll drop in some time when I ain't got nothing else to do."

VIII.

Chapter Eight

BY Monday morning Gene had decided to lay off from work a few days. Gene was getting tired of the mill. That was the principal reason, but in addition to that he wanted to be around when Sheriff Jim and his bride came home. With nothing to do, Gene decided to get as drunk as whiskey would make him. He found some corn under the kitchen table and by midafternoon two pints had been consumed.

The remainder of the afternoon he spent under a pool table downtown. At dark he got up and bought another pint of corn. It was white and raw. When the poolroom closed at twelve that night some men took him out on the street and started him home. When he was within a block of the house a night policeman saw him and took him down to the jail. They threw him in a cell to sleep it off.

Gene had not seen her the night before, but when he

woke up the next morning there was a girl on the bunk in the cage next to his. She was huddled pathetically under the filthy yellow blanket, her hands over her face, crying softly. Gene rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"What's the matter, kid?" he asked her, rubbing his eyes and face.

She pulled the blanket from her face and looked at Gene, but she did not answer.

"What happened, kid?" Gene tried once more to make her talk. "Something go wrong?"

The girl turned her back and began crying more bitterly. Her dress was wrinkled, and covering her shoes was dried red mud.

When the guard came in later with a pail of breakfast Gene kicked the bucket under the bunk, and asked the man about the girl.

"Say, what's the matter with you, anyway? You must be nuts. Why ain't you asking questions about getting out of here instead of fooling with the shemale? Say?"

"That's right. When do I get out?"

"The chief says to turn you loose at twelve and not a minute before."

"Hell, I'm sober enough to go now. But, say: what's the kid doing in the jug?"

"Say, you must have been sure enough soused last night. You didn't see her when you came in?"

"Naw."

The guard sat down on the bunk beside Gene asking for a cigarette.

"Well," he began, sucking deeply on the cigarette, "Mike —Mike he's the one on the morning beat—Mike he picks her up early yesterday morning on the River Road and brings her in and says to give her something to eat. Well, I—say you know she's wanted 'way up in Williamston, Delaware, for running off from home or something—well, I goes down and brings up a big pail slopping over with greens and fatback and cornpone but she takes a sniff at the pail with her smeller and wouldn't touch the chow. And she says she ain't et since 'way last Monday or Tuesday, and she's beginning to look like it, too. Say, you know I've seen 'em hold out a week or more but when they do start in they sure God stuff their guts. Well, I—say, you must have been dead and stinking soused last night if you didn't smell the shemale over there—well, I took a liking to the cutie first off. Yep. So I goes in her cage and says 'Hello, there, little cutie, how's everything?' She was pretty cold, as a fellow said, and I had a hell of a time trying to feel her out a little to see if she was what she made out to be. Well, I eases

up 'side of her and lets my hands feel around the various and well-known parts, as a fellow said. But she hits at me and dives under the bunk. Then I grabs her legs around here and fools around up here a while, but dry smoking don't get you no smoke, as a fellow said, so I makes her get on the bunk where I could do something to her. Well, I could see she didn't want to come accross, so I says 'How'd you like to get out of here?' and she answers right up: 'Will you let me out?'

" 'That all depends,' I tells her, 'because I might lose my job if I was to let you out.' Well, she starts crying and going on like a shemale, and after I'd let her get all het up, as a fellow said, I says, 'I'll let you out if you'll let me get in the bunk with you!' Well, I could see right off she didn't want to come across, but she was so crazy about getting out I could see she would do most anything in God's world I'd told her to do. After awhile she says: 'Will you let me out?'" 'Sure,' I tells her, 'I'll let you out at daylight if you'll let me get in the bunk with you.' 'How about it, cutie?' I keeps up at her till she looks at me and shuts her eyes and stretches out right there. Well, I had no kick coming, as a fellow said, and she said it was the first time, too. Well, it was just right. It ain't often that a good-looking cutie made just right comes into these sticks like that. Hell, a

man gets fed up bedding down these nigger gals all the time. But, say, you know there was a red hot highyellow bedded down in here last week. Yes, sir. But I reckon that little cutie over there is good enough for the likes of me, as a fellow said."

"Why didn't you let her out, if she came across?"

"Hell, man, I'd have lost my job if I'd have done that!"

Gene looked at the girl in the cage. She was the kind he liked.

"Say," the guard asked earnestly, "how'd you like to get in there with her for about ten minutes?"

"How in hell can I get in, with all these locks and chains around here?"

"I'll let you in if you know how to keep your mouth shut. But you'd have to rape her—that'd be the only way now."

Gene took off his coat and followed the guard through his cell door and into the cage where the girl lay on the bunk. Her face was stained with tears. Her hair fell over her shoulders and her dress was torn around the neck. When Gene entered her cage she jumped up expectantly, thinking she was to be freed. When she saw the guard, though, she fell back on the bunk, her face white and her body limp.

The girl said not a word. Gene threw a blanket over the front of the cage and sat down on the bunk beside her.

Before struggling with her he inspected her body. Then he twisted her arm until she bit blood from her lips in pain. It was not very long, though, before she fell on the bunk resistless, her eyes trembling in the tear-reddened sockets.

After Gene had raped her he took from her finger a gold ring, and then threw the greasy yellow blanket over her nude body. Around her neck and on her breasts were large blue fingermarks left by the guard.

When he had finished with her Gene whistled for the guard to open the cell door.

At twelve he went home to dinner, whistling all the way.

Before he reached the house Gene knew he had worked his last night at the mill. He was missing a lot living like that. He was through with it for good.

IX.

Chapter Nine

SHERIFF JIM and his bride came home the following Sunday night. John's father stalked in white-faced. He looked like a man who had been in his grave a week, deciding to get up and live again.

Her name was Kitty.

After Kitty had been introduced to Rose everybody went in the parlor to wait for Sook; they expected her to arrive any minute. Sheriff Jim sat down in his chair by the centre table and picked up the paper. Rose stood by the front window watching for Sook. Gene stretched out on the lounge smoking and looking at Kitty's legs and watching the vibrations of her breasts. Kitty strutted around the room, smoking, talking to John, and inspecting everything in sight. John, too, had lust in his eyes.

"They don't come any worse than this," Kitty curled her lips depreciatively, flicking ashes on the carpet.

"What don't?" John asked.

"Towns," said Kitty.

"Where you been living?" Rose asked mockingly, turning around.

"Where is everybody?" Kitty asked of Gene, ignoring Rose completely. "Gone to church?"

"Everybody's gone to bed in this town, except Sook Robinson," Rose smiled knowingly at John and Gene, "and she'll be here in a minute to pep things up a little."

"Sook Robinson?" Kitty frowned. "Who is she? The cook or the laundress?"

Sheriff Jim glanced hopelessly over the top of his paper at Kitty.

Gene winked at Kitty and threw a wad of paper at her. She went over and sat beside Gene on the lounge, propping her feet on the chair in front of her. John, who was sprawling in the chair, winked first with his clear eye and then with his bloodshot right.

"What do you do around here when it's not a holiday?" Kitty yawned.

"Go to bed," Gene whispered, rubbing his five-day beard against her cheek.

Kitty winked at John.

Sheriff Jim relit his cigar.

"What you looking at, dearie?" Kitty laughed at Rose. "Is there a parade going by?"

"There'll be a funeral parade when Sook gets through with you," Rose replied without looking around.

"I'm damned. Why should I be afraid of her when there are all these big men here to protect me?"

"Only one of them belongs to you, and he's scared of Sook."

"How many of them belong to you, dearie?"

"One—and he's a better man than you'll ever get."

"I'm damned. You talk like I couldn't get any man I wanted."

Tossing her black curls Rose got up, striding across the room.

Uneasily Sheriff Jim looked at Kitty from behind his paper. She was purposely exposing her underlegs to John.

Kitty made faces at Rose while her head was turned. When she had gone back to the window Kitty pulled up her stockings, snapping her garters with a bang!

"That's right, show off your legs!" Rose stormed. "It proves what you are."

"Where did you come from, dearie, a convent?"

"I came off the streets, but I don't fool around with other women's men."

"What's the matter, dearie, do they turn you down?"

"Here, here, Kitty!" Sheriff admonished severely. "Behave yourself!"

"I'm damned. I hope you don't think I'd let her run me out of my new home, do you?"

"Who in hell said anything about running you off?" Rose shouted angrily. "You leave John alone and I won't bother you."

"I'm damned. Is John your man? I thought it was Gene you were gripping about. John? I'm damned. Come here, John, and kiss your new momma—There's nothing wrong with a momma loving and kissing her son a little, is there, dearie?"

Pulling John's head against her breasts Kitty noisily kissed his lips and throat.

Rose flew across the room jerking John to the floor. She slapped Kitty's face with the palms of her hands so fiercely that the outline of her fingers lay on Kitty's face in red whelps.

Sheriff Jim pulled Rose away from her, flinging her to the other side of the room. John he kicked to the door. Gene was out of it.

"Why can't you behave yourself, Kitty, and leave Rose

alone? She's not the kind what'll stand for a lot of foolishness. You ought to know that by now."

"I'm damned. I wasn't doing a thing to her and here she comes over and hits me. I'm a lady, and I'll be a two-bit whore if I'll stand for it! Turn me loose, I'm going to beat hell out of her! Turn me loose, I said!"

Sheriff Jim held her arms behind her.

"Why don't you go back to hustling on the streets where you belong, instead of trying to hang around decent people raising hell all the time? Say! Why don't you?"

"Cut it out, Rose, and leave Kitty alone," John commanded.

"Shut up! She started it. I wasn't doing a thing to her."

Sheriff Jim, releasing Kitty, relit his cigar.

"Sook's going to raise hell with everybody when she gets here," Gene shouted above the din.

Rose went to her chair by the window, taking up the watch for Sook.

Kitty stood before the mantlepiece mirror putting powder on her nose. When she finished she licked her lips with her tongue. Gene's eyes were on Kitty all the time now. He liked the drape of her gown around her bulging thighs.

Kitty strutted around the room, touching John with her

hips each time she passed him. Rose glanced around every few minutes glaring surlily.

Suddenly Rose jumped to her feet hurling a china ash tray which missed Kitty's head by a scant few inches. The tray smashed against the wall frightening everybody. Each was certain it heralded Sook's arrival.

"That's right! Wiggle your behind all over the damn room!" Rose shouted nervously in her high-pitched voice. "Why don't you take off all your clothes! You would get him quicker that way—you tin whore! I've been watching you wiggle your behind against John, and damned if I'm going to stand for it any longer, either!"

The sound of quickened breath was the only disturbance in the parlor. Sheriff Jim relit his cigar, requiring three matches.

"Everybody's against me," Kitty sighed forlornly against Gene's shoulder. "Rose doesn't like me, and another woman is coming to run me out of town."

"I ain't got nothing against you," Gene whispered hoarsely in her ear. "Just give me a chance! I'll show you how much I like you."

John whispered something in Kitty's other ear.

"What about Sheriff Jim?" Gene asked her behind his hand.

Kitty laughed up her sleeve.

John leaned over and tickled her knees with a slip of paper. Gene kept his eyes on John until he threw away the paper and slumped in his chair. Rose got up and tip-toed to the centre of the room, attracted by the muffled whispers.

"Sook's not coming tonight," John said decisively, standing up stretching. "Reckon I'll go to bed.'

"There's nothing better to do around here," Kitty winked at Gene.

Sheriff Jim threw aside his paper wearily. His cigar was burnt to a stump.

"Ready to go to bed, honey?" Kitty asked Sheriff Jim, winking at Gene.

"It's about time, I reckon, Kitty," he said, scratching his hairless head.

"Who's going to wait up for Sook?" Rose asked nervously.

"To hell with Sook," John answered manfully. "Sook aint no bear. Who in hell is scared of her anyway?"

"You was the other night."

"What terrible English, dearie!" Kitty shrugged her slim shoulders.

"Go on to bed, Rose," John commanded, pushing her through the door.

"Lock up, John," Sheriff Jim directed. "Come on, Kitty, and we'll go to bed."

Gene watched Kitty while she walked up the stairway. The movements of her body were intense.

Gene went to his room and sat down on the bed waiting. He smoked half a dozen cigarettes. Later a door down the hall squeaked and someone tip-toed to his door. Jumping up he jerked open the door and in came Rose.

"You thought I was Kitty, didn't you?" she smiled.

"Where is she at?"

"She went in John's room just now."

"Turn out the light," Gene growled hoarsely.

Rose turned the key in the doorlock.

X.

Chapter Ten

THE sultry, devitalizing summer heat that lay over Lewisville for six months in the year became at times almost unbearable to Gene. Yet as soon as he had conquered the mid-day heat by lying naked on the floor drinking ice water, other ills fell upon him. For one thing the house was like an undertaker's parlor since Sheriff Jim had decided he was going to die, and Gene could not stay there very long at a time. And he had lost his job at the oil mill—but that was not all by any means: Rose ran away from John because he gave Kitty all his money and slept with her most of the time, and went to Atlanta to hustle just when he was beginning to like her a little. And then on top of that Kitty gave him a bad case of syphilis. But he was not her only victim, for John caught the disease from her, a man by the name of Swint who ran a dry goods store downtown was not able to walk for several months, and

likewise the man who lived next door to Sheriff Jim. Sheriff Jim's case which he contracted ten or fifteen years before from an octaroon in the county jail was renewed.

Sheriff Jim had tried to bribe Kitty into leaving, but she would not move a step for a cent less than ten thousand. And Sheriff Jim of course told her he would see her in hell before he gave her that much. By this time Kitty was known far and wide, and Sheriff Jim was so ashamed of himself for being played with by Kitty that he had not been downtown for three weeks or more. Before Rose left home she told him about Kitty letting a man in an automobile pick her up one night, and going with him to a still down the river where she got so drunk by drinking cane drippings that she threw all her clothing in the river and rode to town muleback at three o'clock in the morning. When she reached the courthouse square—Rose told Sheriff Jim—she led the mule around to the county jail and told the men there that she wanted to have him arrested for insufficient rape. She lay around the jail until the men were through with her, and then walked home looking as naked as a loose woman can.

Kitty swore every word of it was a lie when Sheriff Jim cursed her for acting like a damn fool; but the men who had taken her in the jailcribs knew better.

And then one night Sheriff Jim died suddenly. As soon as Sook heard about it she ran up to the house not waiting to dress completely. It was the first time she had been there since Sheriff Jim's marriage.

Sook was yelling for Kitty long before she reached the first steps. She did not even stop to look at the corpse. Kitty was upstairs in bed, and when she didn't answer Sook, up the stairway two and three steps at a jump went Sook. She pulled Kitty out of bed and threw her on the floor. No one else was awake at the time, and of course nobody knew what was taking place until Gene was awakened by Kitty's screams and ran down to her room. The noise woke John, too.

Sook was throwing chairs and everything else she could reach with her hands. Gene and John arrived just in time to see Sook crash a chair across Kitty's face so hard that most of her front teeth were broken off at the gums. Kitty yelled and dived for her trunk where she kept her pistol, but Sook was too quick for her and knocked her unconscious with the washstand drawer. They pulled Sook away from Kitty to keep her from killing Sheriff Jim's widow. While she lay crumpled lifelessly in the corner against the overturned washstand blood flowed freely from her ears and nostrils.

"Turn me loose!" Sook yelled at Gene when Kitty

turned on her back. "Turn me loose! Turn me loose! I'm going to brain the bastard. Turn me loose! I'm going to kill the God damn son of a bitch—so help me God!"

Pinning her arms behind her Gene and John dragged Sook down the hall. She kicked, scratched and fought every inch of the way.

"The God damn son of a bitch—I'm going to brain her, so help me God! The bastard coming down here and killing Sheriff Jim with her damn foolishness. I left her alone—I thought she'd treat him good as long as he lived, and now look at the way she went and done! She's been laying out in the woods with every God damn pair of breeches in town ever since she came. I let her alone—I knew she was after his money—but I thought she'd treat him good as long as he lived. And now look at her—the God damn whoring son of a bitch!"

John found some cocaine and Sook soon quieted down a little. And later, after two or three snowstorms, she wouldn't let anyone else touch Sheriff Jim when it was time to prepare his body for burial. Sook would not even let the undertaker touch him. She bathed him, shaved him, put his Sunday clothes on him, and lifted him in the casket all by herself. She would not even let anyone in the room while she was doing it, and the undertaker and his assistants sat

on the front steps waiting in case she did not finish but when she came out of the room and called them in to look at the body they had to admit it was done to perfection. Although Sook did not put the embalming fluid in the body she did everything else there was to be done in making it ready for the grave.

Kitty lay in her bed all that day and the one following. She got up the afternoon of Sheriff Jim's funeral, but Sook swore she would kill her if she so much as put her foot inside the cemetery. Kitty flared up, but there was nothing she could do about it. Sook was known far and wide for backing up every word she spoke.

There were hundreds of Sheriff Jim's friends at the funeral. He was one of the biggest men in the county, and men, women and children came to pay their respects to him as a friend and as their sheriff. Most of the stores downtown were closed all day.

The minister who had been secured to say the last words over Sheriff Jim was a young man, and it was his first funeral. Everything went along smoothly however, until the preacher forgot the prayer he had memorized. Sook all the time was crying so loudly at the head of the casket that the man took it for granted she was Sheriff Jim's widow. When he forgot his lines he improvised consolingly:

"Lord, help this noble and faithful wife find comfort in her husband's death . . . "

Before he could go any further Sook had jumped to her feet believing Kitty was there and that the minister was speaking to her. She looked wildly over the bowed heads of the mourners and began firing off her .38 in all directions, and yelling at the top of her voice for Kitty. When the shots began whizzing over their heads the mourners ran for cover behind the church at the end of the cemetery. In the excitement the minister dropped his book of directions in the open grave, and when Sook had been calmed with a shot of cocaine, and after everybody had returned to the services, the undertaker had to go down in the grave for the book before the service could be concluded.

When Gene and John returned home after the funeral they discovered that Kitty had packed her clothes and gone away. She had been in such a hurry to leave town before Sook came back from the cemetery that she did not even wait to take all her belongings. When he was looking around in her room that afternoon Gene found a number of her dresses and things that she had left behind.

XI.

Chapter Eleven

THE Monday morning following Sheriff Jim's funeral Gene went with John to the sawmill on Dirty Gut Creek. John had promised to pay him twenty dollars a week, and since his money was getting low Gene decided it would not hurt him to work two or three weeks. Gene continued to live with John, and they found a negro woman to clean the house and cook their meals.

Down at the sawmill the heat of the sun blistered the body so brutally that very few men with white skin could work in the open without wearing gauntleted gloves and a wide brimmed hat protecting the neck. In the creek bottom the deep convex sky focused the sun rays like a burning glass. If there happened to be a hole in the shirt the sun blistered the exposed flesh until it was puffed and raw. The air cooked the earth like oven heat. From early morning until late at night it scorched the lungs and parched the

throat. Unless the mouth was kept closed the tongue became dry as a bleached bone and the teeth seared the membrane of the mouth like heated pebbles.

There was not very much that Gene could do at the mill. The negroes did practically all there was to be done. John told him he could stick some lumber if he wanted to, and Gene went out to wrestle with the green ten inch pineboards. In less than an hour Gene was back under the shelter of the shed.

"What's the matter?" John asked, laughing. "The boards too heavy to stick?"

"Hell, it's the damn sun. I've got steam in my head. Christ! Give me something to do in the shade."

"Hell, Gene, it aint hot yet," John said earnestly, lifting his head from the sawdust. "We're having a cool spell now. When it gets good and hot you sweat the salt out of you all over your shirt and breeches. When it's good and hot them coons yonder wet the ground like a shower had passed over."

Gene staggered to the slab-roofed shed and fell limply on the sawdust. He was sick with the heat. His eyes were bloodshot and there was a wide white circle around his mouth. After he had lain there a while he turned over and

crawled on his hands and knees to the waterbucket and held his head in the water until his mind returned.

"Take it easy, Gene," John advised. "You got to get used to it slow-like."

Gene pulled off his shirt and sprawled on the sawdust. The heat burnt through the slabs and scorched the air under the shed. He endeavored to get on his feet to find shade under a tree, but his legs were lifeless and he tumbled to the ground.

"Hey! You black bastards!" John shouted at the negroes, raising himself on his elbows. "What the hell you mean by eating on the job! Throw that damn melon down and get to work before I brain hell out of half of you!"

All the negroes except one jumpt away from the watermelon and went back to their tasks. He dug his fingers into the cool red melon before climbing on the saw rigging.

"Throw that down, you black—"

The negro sawyer stuffed the melon into his mouth with one hand while he shifted the band lever with the other.

John ran down the shed to the rip saw, snatching up a knotted piece of green slabwood from the ground and clubbed the negro's head with it. The slab splintered into several pieces.

"God damn your black soul to hell, didn't you hear me!"

The negro's eyes answered pleadingly, but his lips did not speak. John picked up the splintered piece of slabwood and struck him across the face. There was still no outcry from the man. Then John reached over the belt and jerked the negro to the ground. The negro did not resist him.

"Hey, Gene!" John called, "knock this nigger down and hold him here till I find what I want."

Gene did not have the strength to get on his feet. He crawled down the shed toward John.

"Hurry up, Gene!" John begged, "I aint got all day to waste on this nigger."

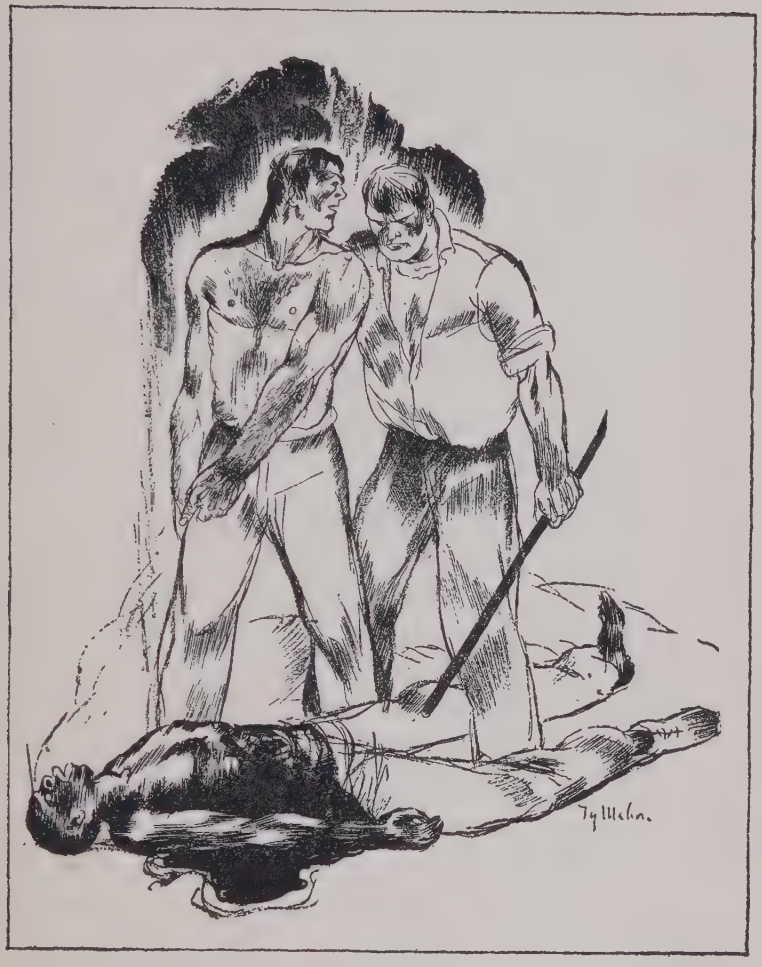
Gene staggered toward the two men. His head was burning up inside.

The other negroes were running through the creek bottom toward the river. They would never come back. John knocked the negro down.

"I put the bastard to sleep with my fist," he called to Gene. "If he wakes up before I get back hit him again."

John ran to the tool house. Gene staggered to the rip saw. The man was lying under the saw. There was fresh blood on him. The slabs overhead were splattered with it, and on the ground a pool was swelling under the sawdust.

John came running in with a ten-pound crowbar in his hands.



"What the hell!" he exlaimed.

"God, John, he was like that when I got here."

"I reckon he got up and fell against it," he reasoned, spitting out yellow tobacco juice. "I'd have killed him anyway, though, so what the hell! One way is as good as another, aint it?"

The excitement had revived Gene. He was feeling better and his head was clearing.

"I'll make sure of it, anyway," John told Gene, striking the negro's head two or three times with the crowbar.

"I'd better find a doctor," Gene said.

"Doctor?" John repeated, kicking the negro's head with his foot. "Hell, aint he dead yet?"

Gene turned the body over. The lower part did not turn with the head and shoulders.

"Give him a drink of water," John directed in a moment of compassion. "He's making motions like he wants a drink."

Gene poured a dipperful of water in the negro's mouth. The water gurgled and bubbled in his throat, trickling to the ground from the mass of intestine where the stomach had been bisected by the rip saw.

"It don't do him no good to take a drink," John said looking down at Gene, "it all runs out on the ground."

"Aint that funny though?" Gene commented, pouring another dipperful in the throat. "Who'd thought water would run out like that? It wetted his whistler anyway, didn't it?"

"Here," John said, handing Gene a match, "prop his mouth open with this and pour some more down. I like to see that."

Gene poured, dipper by dipper, the remaining water down the throat. The negro was dead.

"Yes, sir," John said screwing up his mouth, "that's the funniest thing I ever saw. It sure don't do him no good to take a drink, though."

"I wouldn't waste good corn on him," Gene laughed, "would you, John?"

"Grab hold of his feet, Gene, and we'll finish the job God forgot to," he motioned.

They carried the body to the rip saw and lowered it until the torso fell to the ground severed.

"It can be handled in two little pieces better than it could be in one big one, eh, Gene?"

"Damn right."

"Here," John directed, holding out an oil can, "squirt a little of this on your hands and breeches."

Both of them rubbed lubricating oil in the blood on their hands and clothes.

"We'd better be hitting the road, hadn't we?" Gene suggested.

"Run away?" John asked in astonishment. "Hell, there ain't no use in running away. Nobody'll do nothing to you around here. Why, good God, last year I made a damn coon sit straddle the carriage and it split him wide open like a shote, excepting it was the other way up and down instead of crossways like that nigger there. Aint no sense in running away: coons get split open around here every once in awhile, but nobody don't say nothing about it. Just keep your mouth shut, and clean off that blood. That's all we'll have to do."

"You are the boss."

"Now, I reckon we'll have to get rid of that nigger," John said, scratching his head. "I tell you, go hitch up that old white mule to the buggy. I'll let you take them two little pieces over to his old woman."

Gene hitched the mule to the buggy while John dragged the body to the logroad. When it was ready John threw the upper part in the front and the lower half in the back.

"Now, Gene, drive over there and throw 'em out on the ground by the cabin," he directed. "And don't help nobody

tote nothing nowheres. Hell, he aint nothing but a damn nigger and a trifling coon at that."

Gene prodded the mule with a piece of slabwood and drove down the logroad to the clearing. The negro's head lay twisted against the dashboard, and the match Gene had placed between his teeth was still there. Gene hung his feet outside to keep from getting blood on his shoes. The negro's feet, with one shoe missing, dangled behind in the dust.

XII.

Chapter Twelve

ONE evening after supper while he was going down to the poolroom Gene suddenly remembered the nightwatchman's wife. Kitty and Rose had occupied his mind so long that he had never thought of going back to the mill some night at twelve looking for her. But he would soon find out, he said to himself as he ran across the railroad tracks toward the mill. And he would get what was due him, too, after waiting all this time. Froggy would surely be there.

When he reached the mill yards and heard the hum of machinery and the exhaust of steam from the powerhouse he wished he could work there again. He would even fork seed for the opportunity of being there every night with Froggy and the other men. The mill had been his first home when he came to Lewisville, and now the crashing, slapping noises and the yellowish lights on the dusty windows called to him to return. Sitting on a crosstie behind the

seed shed listening to the slap of the belts and the groans of the conveyors Gene waited nearly an hour before going through the mill in search of Froggy.

Froggy was glad to see Gene. He jumped from the chair in which he had been dozing, slapping Gene on his back enthusiastically.

"You're just the fellow I've been looking for for the past month or more. Where have you been all this time, young fellow? I was beginning to think you had left town."

"Yeah?" Gene asked laughing.

"Where have you been working, young fellow?"

"Oh, I got my name on a saw mill payroll."

"Yeah?"

"Right."

"Hell, I've missed you around here. Why don't you come back on?"

"I guess not. I'll be hitting the road pretty soon now."

"Naw!"

"That's right."

"Well, young fellow, I've got something I want to say to you—I got a little business proposition I thought you might be interested in. A little private proposition, you know. I don't know but what we can get together on some-

thing or other. I was talking it over with my wife only the other day—"

"Peddling alky, I guess," Gene remarked to Froggy, but he was more interested in the mention of Mrs. Fuller than he was in any business scheme.

"Bootlegging? No, no," Froggy protested. "Nothing like that. Something else. No, that's one thing I don't fool with. I'd rather work around here all my life and be a poor man than have to sit up in some God damn jail half the time."

"Well, let's hear your proposition, shoot it off," Gene demanded nervously.

The nightwatchman beckoned Gene out the door. They walked around the side of the seed shed to the pumphouse, where Froggy turned in the airway. It was dimly lighted by the mill windows, and they went to the bench against the wall. Neither spoke for several minutes, Gene waiting for Froggy to state his proposition.

"Yes, young fellow," Froggy began, "I took a liking to you from the start for some reason. You made an impression on me the first time I saw you forking in the feeder. I said to myself: 'Now that's a fine young fellow. I bet he ain't like most of these young men nowadays whats so God damn smart nobody can't tell 'em nothing.' Yes, sir, young

fellow, I took a liking to you the very first time I saw you forking in the feeder—"

"To hell with that stuff," Gene grumbled, "what's this private business proposition you were talking about a little while ago?"

"Now wait a minute, young fellow—hold your horses. I was just coming to that part. Now, as I was saying: I took a special liking to you the first time I saw you in the seed shed forking in the feeder. Well, I've been on the look-out for the past year or so for a young fellow like you. And as soon as I saw you in the seed shed forking in the feeder, I says to myself: 'Now, that's the young fellow I've been looking for,' but before I could say anything to you about it, you skipped out and was gone God knows where."

"They fired hell out of me when I laid off so long. That's why I wasn't here no more."

"Is that right? . . . Well, I'll be damned. Now, let's see where I was at—Yep, now let's get this thing straight. You see, young fellow, I want to make you an offer, and the offer is this: I'll give you one hundred dollars in cold cash if you'll do something for me and leave town for good on the next train out—"

"Do what, for a hundred bucks?" Gene asked suspiciously.

"Now, that's just it," Froggy answered mysteriously. "That's the whole thing—What you're to do won't take you no time, and then you get the money in cold cash and catch the next train out. See?"

"See, hell! See what? What you want me to do? Bump some bird off?"

"No, no. It's nothing like that. It ain't dangerous at all, young fellow. You just do what I say, see? And then you get the money right after—"

"Right after what?"

"Right after making my wife pregnant!" the watchman snapped out explosively in Gene's face.

Gene stared at Froggy with eyes that out-popped his. He could feel the blood damn in his head and overflow. His eyes swam in perspiration.

The mill-machinery sped up until the noises thundered through the windows in mad frenzy. Cold sweat popped out on Gene's face, and clung there like balls of lead. Froggy stared at Gene without blinking an eyelid. The chuck-chuck, chuck-chuck-chuck of the steam exhaust rose in volume and magnitude, the vibrations in the ether clogging his throat.

"What do you say, young fellow?"

Gene looked at Froggy and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the backs of his hands.

"God Almighty, but you scared me," he whispered with a jerking contraction of his chest.

"Scared you? How'd I scare you?"

"Jesus—I thought you wanted me to bump off two or three dozen guys, or something like that."

"No, hell, nothing like that—what do you say about the proposition, young fellow?"

"God—I don't know what to say. . . . What you want that done for?"

"Well, young fellow, it's like this: You see, me and my wife want a kid, and, well, it's like this: I ain't got the right kind of a life to allow her to have kids by me. I been broke down for the past fifteen or twenty years with the clap and if I was to get a kid maybe it wouldn't turn out right, or something. I don't know. Maybe so, and maybe not. But you can't tell always and I don't want to take no chances. But we want a kid worser than anything, and I thought you could take my place, and I'd pay you and you could leave town. That's the way me and my wife figured it out, and it's the only way I know what to do—you know how to keep your mouth shut and mind your own business, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Well, what do you say?"

"Hell, what's your wife going to say about it?"

"That's all fixed up, young fellow. That's all fixed up between us."

"But how do you know she'll want me?"

"Hell, didn't she tell me to speak to you about it?"

"She did!"

"Sure."

Gene lit a cigarette and looked at Froggy in the flickering light of the match. The watchman was in dead earnest. Gene felt sorry for him for a moment. His hair was graying. His skin was too big for the frame of his face and neck, and hung down in bags and wrinkles. His eyes, though, shone with a sparkling light which came through the crystals of moisture enveloping them. Gene felt kindly toward the old man, at the moment.

The plans were completed. Gene was to visit Froggy's home at nine o'clock the following night. Mrs. Fuller was to receive him at the door. And Froggy would be at the mill punching the clock every hour on the hour.

"Nine o'clock," the watchman reminded, shaking hands with Gene.

"Nine o'clock," Gene repeated to himself stumbling over the crossties and rails toward town.

XIII.

Chapter Thirteen

NINE o'clock.

Glancing at his watch Gene ran up the steps. He was early. It was only eight thirty-five. A shaded light shone through the screen door. It was a mellow light, a light shaded by a blue and yellow mantle on which silhouetted knights in armour lanced their paths in endless circles. Gene tightened the knot of his necktie mechanically.

He had put on a clean shirt for the occasion.

She smiled as she opened the screendoor for him to step inside. She wore a black velvet gown fashioned severely from the bodice downward to the flaring skirt. A scarlet silk rope lay on her hips, the knotted ends bouncing helter-skelter around her knees. On her breasts two redbirds were swallowing cherries.

"This is lucky—" Gene breathed huskily.

Again she smiled, the corners of her lips retreating. Gene slammed the door behind him, and followed her down the hall and into the parlor.

"God! This is lucky—"

And again she smiled, the corners of her lips shooting outward and upward, curving pleasurably.

Gene stared hungrily at her soft body, her agile breasts. He was going to be greedy.

"Are you," she spoke for the first time, "are you going away tomorrow?"

"Me?" Gene responded in mocking strain. "I should say not! Who's been telling you fairy tales?"

"What are those?"

"What?"

"Fairy tales."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Bedroom stories?"

"Say, did you know Kitty?"

"Kitty who?"

"Kitty. Kitty—Sheriff Jim's Kitty."

"Oh, that thing!"

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You knew her?"

"Sure, I knew the—"

"The what?"

"Say, what do you want to know all this for?"

"Oh, nothing. I thought you might have known her."

"What is she to you?"

"Nothing now."

"She used to be, huh?"

"Not much. Kitty wasn't nothing but a slut."

"That's what most women are, aren't they?"

"Kitty was a dirty slut."

"All of them are either dirty or clean."

"I like 'em clean."

"There's not much difference."

"No, there ain't much difference."

"If they are clean they get dirty, and if they are dirty they stay dirty."

"That's right."

"Froggy says that's right, too."

"Is he at the mill?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I just wanted to know."

"What difference does it make where he is? You'll get your money, won't you?"

"Naw."

"Why?"

"I don't want it now."

"You're not going to take it?"

"Jesus, no! I ought to pay him."

"Shut up!"

"Why didn't you come back to the mill?"

"I was out of town."

"You made me wait a long time."

"How did I know you were waiting for me."

"I waited a long time, anyway."

"I was waiting for you."

"You was?"

"Of course. I'm waiting now, too."

She recrossed her legs, slowly, her garters, red, flashing in unison with the fluttering of the wings of the redbirds. The clock on the mantlepiece chimed ten. She uncrossed her legs.

"I'll be upstairs," she smiled, lingering in the doorway. "Please turn out the lights when you come."

Gene followed, fingering the knot in his necktie. She was waiting at the head of the stairway.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" she called down.

"I will next time."

"Aren't you going away tomorrow?"

"Not unless I go feet first,"

"I'm glad he works at night, aren't you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"If he worked in the daytime he would be here now."

"Night is the best time to work."

"Pull down the shades."

Gene pulled the shades down and wound his watch. He put it on the table at the foot of the bed.

It was almost eleven o'clock now.

Suddenly the door crashed open and somebody switch on the lights. Froggy stood there blinking his popping rabbit eyes in the glare of the room. His thin lips twitched and jerked across his face.

"God Almighty!" Gene's breath was suctioned to make the sound of the words.

"Stop this!"

Mrs. Fuller hastily covered her nude body with the bedcovering.

"Out! Get out! I've changed my mind! Get out!"

Gene, reaching for his trousers, found the automatic and advanced on Froggy. Mrs. Fuller buried her head under the sheet.

With the pistol against the man's chest Gene pulled the

trigger three times. Three would be enough to fix him. The sound was muffled against the flesh.

Gene dragged the body to the stair-landing and pushed it down with the heel of his foot. It bumped down the steps, finally rolling against the hat tree in the hall, crashing it to the floor. Returning, Gene switched off the lights and closed the door.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I kicked it downstairs. I'll dig a hole for it in the morning—How about digging it under the back porch?"

"Oh!"

"What in hell did he want to come over here for? He ought to had better sense than trying to do a damn fool trick like that. Hell, he can't play a game like that with me!"

"Oh! . . . Oh!"

XIV.

Chapter Fourteen

GENE was becoming restless again, he missed the old days when he lived on the town hustling pool. It was true, he made a little money in Lewisville but there was not enough in circulation. If he cleaned out a man he would have to wait sometimes two weeks or more before there was new money in the town. It was Chicago, or Detroit, or Pittsburgh for him soon. Lewisville was too hot to live in. The sun baked and scorched the sandhills from seven in the morning till six or seven at night, and the nights were not much cooler.

He told John about leaving.

"Well, John, I'm hitting the road pretty soon. Better come along with me and see the sights."

"I wish I could, Gene," he said hopelessly. "But I reckon I got to run the mill a while longer. . . . And maybe Flo will come back some time."

"Flo?"

"Flo. You don't know her. She left before you came."

"Christ! Come on with me and I'll show you some sure enough hot mommas what's got the real stuff. Hell, I bet that Flo'd look like ten cents up side these babies I'm telling you about. They got the real stuff, John."

"Flo was a damn good kid," John mused, staring blankly through the wall of the room. "Flo was just about the best little kid I ever knew. Flo wasn't one of those shotguns like Kitty or Rose what'd shoot off a lot of noise and smoke—hell, Flo was just about the best little kid I ever saw. . . . I'd sure as hell like to see her come back.—That damn Kitty sure raised hell around here, didn't she?"

"Aw, Kitty was too damn quick on the trigger. Hell, if she'd been still a while instead of raising hell all over everywhere, everything would've been all right."

"Rose was all right, too. She wouldn't gone off if it hadn't been for that damn Kitty, though."

"That's right. . . . Well, I'm hitting the road pretty soon now, better come along, John, and see the sights."

"Say, you've heard of old man Morgan around here, aint you?"

"The bird with the pile? Sure, what about him?"

"Well, he was asking me about you the other day.

Wanted to know where you was from, and a whole lot of other questions."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Hell, I didn't know what to tell him. But I asked him what he wanted to know for, and he said you sort of favored his boy what's away somewhere."

"Hell, tell him to mind his own business. I don't want to fool around with him—unless he wants to give me some of his pile. If he stops you again, tell him I'd take it and take it hopping. . . . Christ! I'd sure as hell like to get my hands on some of it—but I don't guess he'd come across with it, do you? I'd like to jingle about a gallon of it in my pants for awhile. I'd have all the broads in Chicago taking my shirt off."

"Reckon he knows how to hang on to it, all right," John mused.

"Jesus, John, why don't you set fire to that damn peanut parcher you got down on the creek and hit the road with me? Hell, John, we could pull a damn good racket together somewhere."

"Reckon I'll hang around here a while longer. Flo might come back sometime and I'd want to be here in case she did. Flo was a damn nice kid. I wish she hadn't gone and busted off like she did. I sorta miss her a lot now."

"I'm telling you. I'll get you all the hot stuff you can handle, John. I know how to get 'em. I can make 'em crawl up my pants'legs an old time."

"I got enough of women for a while. That God damn Kitty burnt me up, Gene."

"Yeah, that God damn Kitty—"

"Rose was all right."

"Rose'd been all right if that God damn Kitty hadn't come down here."

"But that damn Kitty—"

"I hope she's smoking now."

"And stinking."

"Kitty was dirty."

"They don't get much dirtier than Kitty."

"Flo was a clean kid, though."

"But that God damn Kitty was dirty."

"That God damn Kitty—"

XV.

Chapter Fifteen

RETURNING home from the poolroom Saturday night Gene saw a girl loitering in front of the highschool building. She was walking slowly toward Gene, and when he was within a few yards of her she turned around. He could not see her face on account of the shadows cast by the trees, yet he knew she was young because of her slim, agile figure. It was unusual to be approached in Lewisville by a woman—especially since Kitty left. She blocked his path, slyly touching his arm.

"Hello," she whispered softly.

"Hello," Gene echoed mechanically.

"Aren't you Bill Russell?" she asked timidly.

"My name is Gene."

"Oh! I thought surely you were Bill. I'm sorry."

"Was you looking for him?"

"Not exactly. . . . I was merely walking around."

"Where you going now?"

"Home, I suppose."

"Where do you live?"

"Over on Maple Street."

"Care if I walk over with you?"

"No, not in the least," she replied invitingly, "but let's walk around this way."

They turned around and went behind the schoolbuilding. She had slipped her arm through Gene's and was now pressing against him with her forearm. Gene put his arm around her waist. She drew away from him at once. They had now reached the vacant lot behind the school. The nearest streetlamps were a block away. He could throw her down easily enough.

"Look here, kid," Gene said unexpectedly without preface, "I'm on to you. I know what you're up to, but you're too damn nice to be on the town. Why do you do it?"

"What! . . . I don't know what you are talking about! Will you please stop holding me and let me go home!"

Gene laughed at her rudely.

The girl began crying softly. Suddenly she jerked free of Gene and ran up the street. Gene in a stride grabbed her arm pulling her back to him. They stood knee-deep in the weeds of the vacant lot.

"Will you please be kind enough to stop holding me!"

"What's your name, kid?" he asked as though he were a policeman and she a runaway child.

"I'm not in the habit of telling strangers my name!"

"What's your name?"

"Myra," she answered between sobs. "Myra Morgan."

"You ain't old man Morgan's kid, are you," he demanded.

The girl nodded, trembling.

"Jesus! What you doing out on the streets?"

Crying hysterically she said she didn't know.

"How long have you been walking the streets?"

"What do you mean?"

"How long have you been walking around like this at night?"

"Tonight was the first time."

"How many men did you meet?"

"None," she pleaded. "None until I saw you."

"So you started tonight."

"Yes, if that's what you mean."

"If what is what I mean?"

"If you mean that I started tonight—Oh! I don't know what I'm talking about!"

"You don't know what you are doing, either. You need a kicking in—you need a spanking, don't you?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't know anything. I've been nearly crazy and I want to kill myself."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh—I can't tell you!"

Pulling Myra with him Gene went to the curb where he spread one of his soiled handkerchiefs on the brick pavement. He made her sit down beside him.

"What if I make you?"

"You wouldn't make me, would you?"

Gene twisted her arm. It hurt her. She looked up at Gene, revealing her face. He was sorry he had hurt her. She was a clean thing, the kind of a girl he could love and not hurt. Gene pulled her closer to him. Her arms and shoulders were soft, unbelievably soft. The women he had known were almost as hard-fleshed as a man. Myra was feminine.

She looked in his eyes.

Falling on his knees in the gutter Gene drew her body in his arms savagely, yet as tenderly as if she had been an infant. She seemed to belong there as much as his arms should hang from his shoulders. Without her there he would be incomplete. He could do without all his limbs

more readily than he could live now without Myra. Her quick breath was fragrant against his cheek.

Holding her tightly with his right arm Gene searched eagerly through the pockets of his clothes. He wanted to give her something. A pencil, a knife, a ring, anything. But he had nothing in his pockets. Wrestling with his necktie he pulled that off and handed it to her. She understood. Folding it carefully she pushed it into the opening of her dress, still looking into his eyes. They kissed.

The drug from her lips produced an opiatic somnolence in his mind and body, uniting them even closer. Myra relaxed, sinking into his arms eagerly. Gene knew he loved her.

"We shouldn't stay here—someone may see us."

"Listen," he threatened, "if anybody comes prowling around here I'll fix them so they'll never say nothing."

Gene showed her his automatic.

Frightened, Myra drew away.

"That's all right, kid. Nobody's coming around here this time of night."

She again relaxed contentedly in his arms.

"Jesus! You're the first kid I ever fell for in all my life, and I've fooled around a lot of women, too."

She snuggled closer to him.

"Say, kid, what made you start hustling?"

"What?—I don't know what you are talking about."

"What made you start running down men?"

"Oh!" she began crying again.

"Aw, kid, I didn't mean to hurt you like that. But Jesus, what made you come out on the streets? You're too damn nice for that"

"Oh, I can't tell you."

"Why not? Come on and tell me."

"Why, I can't talk to you like that. I don't know you well enough."

"You tried to pick me up a little while ago."

"Oh!"

"Tell me, kid."

"I had to—"

"Why did you had to?"

"I—I was engaged to be married and we were going to marry soon and then he went away—"

"And you decided to go on the bum?"

"What?"

"You decided to walk the streets for a living?"

"No, no—you don't understand. Not that!"

"Poor kid," Gene whispered consolingly.

Myra clung to him desperately.

"Listen, kid," Gene began huskily, "I'm nothing but a bum, and I ain't got no family, and I ain't got no money—but I swear to God I want to marry you. I don't know how good this other bird was, but I swear by the Mother of Christ, if you'll tell me how good he was to you, I'll be a million times gooder to you. We'll get out of town tonight in a taxi and get married as soon as we get to a courthouse open for business."

"I'm busted on you, kid, and I'll work like hell for you and keep you like a queen. I ain't much on this highclass stuff, but so help me God Almighty I'll treat you like the best there is. Jesus, kid, I never thought I'd fall like this for a she, but God knows I'm busted on you. Come on, kid, and we'll leave town right now in a taxi and get that little slip of paper as soon as we get to a courthouse open for business."

Gene struck a match, holding it close to Myra's face.

"Jesus, kid! You've got the looks. I could tell you was a swell in the dark, but I never thought you had all that! You're the swellest little kid these old lookers ever looked at. Jesus, kid! I'm plain nuts about you!"

Myra said not a word. Her head was buried deeper in Gene's arms.

"We'll get the hell out of this man's country and I'll get

a job and work like hell for you the rest of my life. Jesus, kid, don't you see I'm busted on you for keeps? You're my woman from now on, see? Don't forget that kid! You're my woman. . . . Gee, hon, I'm clean, honest to God busted on you for keeps. . . . You're my woman now. . . . "

XVI.

Chapter Sixteen

GENE and Myra left Lewisville. They rode in a Pullman.

"Gee, kid," Gene told her, "you don't think I'd let you ride in the dirty coaches, do you? I always ride them, but not this time. I wouldn't let a swell kid like you sit up all night in the dirty coaches.

And all the time Myra could feel the two new rings on her fingers.

They stopped in Philadelphia and found a flat on North Thirty First Street which had four rooms. The place was not as nice as Myra had been accustomed to, and Gene said they would find a better house; but Myra said she liked it, and that settled it.

"Kid, I'm going to get you the swellest place in town some day."

The renting agent was standing beside them, but nonetheless Myra kissed Gene and he kissed her.

It was almost a month before Gene found a job that suited him. A motor transport company hired him, saying they would train him for a regular driver's job. Gene wanted to drive a truck, and he was soon far enough advanced to take one out. For the first week his trucking was in town. He was promised a long haul soon. That was what he wanted.

When Gene was given his first long distance trip Myra cried so much because he would be away all day and all night, that he finally told her she could go along. The jolting ride made her nervously sick, and she had to return on a train.

But later, after he had been driving for nearly a month, and had proven his ability to handle a loaded ten ton truck in urban traffic, Gene was given a longer haul. By this time he was truck-broken, and considered a safe driver by the company. He got a five-dollar raise.

Excitedly, Gene called up Myra one evening just as she was waiting for him to burst through the door and told her that he had to make a trip to New York that night. Myra begged and cried so pathetically to be allowed to go along that Gene, after warning her that it would be cold in the January night, gave in and told her to be ready when he came by at six thirty. Myra was happy, and she was certain

she would not again be frightened by the truck and its noises. This time it would be dark, she reasoned, and she would feel secure on the seat beside Gene.

Myra was so delighted because Gene was letting her go with him that when she climbed in the cab she wildly threw her arms around his neck and kissed him so long that a policeman on the corner yelled and threatened to take down Gene's numbers if he didn't stop holding up traffic. Gene got the truck under way before the policeman could cross the street, however, and when Myra looked back he winked at her.

It was cold. Just as cold as Gene had warned her it would be. But Myra was brave, even though shivering in her heavy coat when the icy January air cut through the cracks in the cab. Gene bent over and kissed her when they were an hour out of town, discovering that her face was like ice and that her teeth were chattering. At the next lunch-stand he drew up off the highroad, and they went in for hot cakes and hot coffee.

"Kid, you'd better catch a bus back to Philly," Gene urged.

But Myra was game, and she said she would stick it out if she froze.

They were under way again. Snow began falling, and

although the roadway was still grayish black, the temperature was far below freezing. Myra wrapped a square of canvas around her legs and sat on them to keep warm. Her head was on Gene's shoulder and her eyes were partly closed. Gene would ask her if she were warm, and Myra would rub her head on his shoulder knowing he would understand. Snow fell heavier.

The noises of the big truck at first benumbed her ears, the result being on her senses a deafening roar without meaning. Then her ears gradually became accustomed to the sounds, enabling her to become receptive. The grinding groans which vibrated the cab and truck with their upgrade receding drone sounding like a hive of disturbed bees, poured through her body filling her to the marrow of her bones with its electrifying charges: the noises filling her with the angry tempo of the motor. Then downgrade she was hurled. The increasing release of energy pouring madly from her body like the sudden discharge of positive elements, draining the last ounce of electrical fluid from her bones' marrow. Her body became pith, suspended and drained. The pushing, pushing, pushing momentum sending the black monster downward, downward, downward into the white night, with its metallic slip, slap-slap, slip, slap-slap of its cogs and chains struggling valiantly to over-

come the nervous interval in the looseness of the machine. . . . Chains, endless, oiled, powerful, whirling slip, slap-slap, slip, slap-slap to eternity. And then, her body sympathetic to the generated noises of the plunging giant, there came the sudden interchange of forces. The black monster hurling itself into the white night, struggling superhumanly to repel the pushing hand behind and to overtake the throttled pace of its motor. . . . the silent interval so short when nature came within sound of man . . . and then the first grind of the cogs, the first groan of the axle, the first rumble of the load, and the lumbering of steel was again under the motivation of a human hand and brain—and upgrade again.

Myra could not sleep. She waited, looked ahead through the flying snow for the next grade—where she would again experience the vitalizing flow of electrical fluid into her body. The expectation and the desire and the fulfillment made her breathless in her moments of ecstasy. The moments when the trailing monster laid its hand on the truck and when the magnetic mind of nature sought subjection over its powerful force . . . the recreation of that first moment when her roots had been grafted to man's. . . .

Gene towered over her, chained to the jerking wheel, tossed sideways and upwards, and smoking to drug the monotony. And there Myra lay with her head on his

shoulder, swaying in an opiate world which forever soared beyond his.

On the outside, the world passed by hushed in its mysterious silences. A light, a shadow, a hovering outline among gaunt trees, and it was an entire domain of love. A man, a woman, a child, a cow, a bed, a roof pacifying the elements and enticing peace from the sky—it was love, surely. A haunting fronge of treetops against the snow-powdered sky, and that flashed by with cinematic rapidity into obscurity. Another world pregnant with the pains and joys of life passed in revue and into dismal disintegration. Two piercing, stinging, blinding streams of light suctioned in a deafening roar of angry freedom . . . and the still, calm sereneness of the white cold night again. . . .

Another world, another, another. Upgrade and downgrade forever through the white cold night. Creeping, crawling, speeding, plunging through the icy white air. Gravitated, motivated forever, slip, slap-slap, slip, slap-slap. . . .

XVII.

Chapter Seventeen

GENE and Myra generally went to a movie once a week that winter and the following spring, and occasionally to a play. All other nights when they were together, were spent at home. Myra read a great deal to Gene, reading aloud from a novel rented from a lending library or from a magazine, for Gene could not read. Yet their greatest moments were found in bed together, when the lights were out; for then it was that Gene told his breathtaking tales from his apparently inexhaustable store of memories. These tales Myra loved with all her heart, beside Gene in the darkness she listened for hours at the most bloodcurdling stories she had ever read or imagined. No book had ever told such things.

One night while they were close together Gene told her about the time he had been adrift on a tramp freighter for forty-three days in the North Atlantic, the crew of six

men living for fifteen days on the ships rats. Myra laughed when Gene said they had only rats to eat.

"Aren't you making some of it up as you tell it, Gene? You really didn't eat rats, did you?"

"Honest to God, hon—we skinned 'em like rabbits first, and then we cut the meat off the bones and put it in a pot with some water and made a kind of stew. Gee, it tasted good, too, believe me! Rat stew stinks like hell if you don't put something in it to kill it, but if you do that, why, it's as good as spring chicken when you are hungry as hell. But these damn rats was hard as hell to catch. We had to hide down in the cargo and bust 'em across the head when they came out looking for something to eat. There was a old tom-cat on that damn raft, but, hell, we ate him like scrambled eggs the thirtieth day out. We fried him instead of stewing him like we did the rats, but you waste a lot of good eating parts that way. Hell, when we boiled the rats we put in every damn thing but toenails and hair and teeth. God! But we was hungry just before we got a boat load of rations! Say, you know, I guess this must of happened about the forty-first or second day out, one bird—God! I was glad it wasn't me, because we didn't get nothing else to eat till the next day—well, this salt drew a mess of guts when the captain was passing out the rations. Well, he plugged

up his nose and shut his eyes and stuffed 'em down his feeder with the butt end of a knife—damn right. Jesus! And this buckie puked up the mess of guts and I'm a son of a gun if it wasn't licked off the deck before you could have said 'Jump nigger!' "

"Gene!" Myra protested, "tell another story quick! I've heard enough of that one!"

During the first few weeks they went down to the shore several times on Sunday, coming home tired and happy. But later they left together no more, for Myra was expecting a baby soon. Gene rarely went out unless Myra was with him.

As the time drew near for the baby's birth, Gene and Myra lived in almost continuous excitement. Gene said he couldn't wait any longer, asking Myra if she wouldn't have the baby right away. Of course she laughed at Gene for saying such a thing, but afterward she pretended to be angry and told Gene he already loved the baby more than he did her. Grabbing her in his arms Gene swore that if she had fifty babies he would love her just as much as he did then. When he released her from his embrace, Myra kissed him a dozen times on his mouth.

And when the night did come, the night when she had to go to the hospital, the night which she had been waiting for

for almost a whole year, Gene had to go on his weekly trip to Jersey City. Myra told him on the phone just before he left town that she would have to go to the maternity hospital sometime that night, and he came by the flat on his way to New Jersey.

"I've fixed it up with the taxi stand on the corner, and all you have to do is go downstairs and one of the cabs will be standing at the curb. The starter promised to keep one standing there until you went down."

Gene was far more excited than was Myra. However, he steadied himself with a pint of gin and a pocketful of cigarettes. And Myra sat by the window looking down on the street, waiting. She was composed, yet mightily thrilled. The new adventure filled her mind.

Late that night when she walked slowly down the steps to the waiting taxi she was going into a new world of her own. Exploring, her thoughts went out to her mother, to her grandmother, to her great-grandmother, all now dead. Would they, she wondered weeping with joy, would they be interested in knowing that their daughter, Myra Morgan, was about to enter woman's world? Would they. . . .

XVIII.

Chapter Eighteen

"WHAT are you going to call him?" Gene asked.

"Leon—Leon Morgan."

"Leon? Aw, don't give him a name like that. He won't have a chance with a name like that."

"Leon. Leon Morgan. That's a pretty name, Gene."

"Call him Bill, or Tom, or Mike, or something like that," Gene pled. "Leon aint no name for a good kid like him, hon."

"You promised—" Myra reminded.

"All right, you win. But, say, why'd you pick out that one?"

"My brother was named Leon."

"He was? . . . Is he the one your old man was always yapping about?"

Myra said he was the one of whom her father always spoke.

The baby gained in weight not quite half a pound during the first two months of his life. Myra gave him the attention the nurse said he should have, feeding him regularly and frequently, but his growth was retarded. When he was three months old he weighed only five and a half pounds.

Although they did everything they could do for the baby, he did not thrive. He was given sun baths on the fire escape regularly each morning and afternoon, the nurse brought bottle after bottle of prepared food, and still he did not gain. Gene and Myra did everything they could do for the child, but there seemed to be some deficiency in his life.

Life became for Gene and Myra a torturing pain. The baby was fighting for his life. They could at times see the struggle within the body. Often near death he clutched for life. When he was four months old he weighed nine pounds, yet in his eyes Myra found pleading, inarticulate words asking for something, anything.

Gene's face became lined and taut. His eyes had narrowed to two cold slits in his face. Myra attempted to keep her own sorrow to herself, yet when she was alone she often cried unhumanly over the frail body of her son. The doctor said the baby had a chance to live, but Myra was certain she had detected an evasion of the truth in his voice and manner.

That winter when Leon was eight months old Myra told Gene one morning when he started to work that she believed the danger was past, and that he would gain in weight and strength. Little Leon now weighed twelve pounds, and his head was covered with a thick growth of black hair like Gene's. Yet, the child was still unlike the other babies she saw on the street below her window. Later, when she was alone in the flat with Leon and was called to the door by a tradesman she carried him into the bedroom before opening the door. At first she was unconsciously ashamed of Leon, later realizing it to be true. She said nothing to Gene.

And in a few weeks Myra stopped bathing Leon within Gene's sight. She did not want him to see the body. For covering the child, especially on the foreside of the torso, was an abnormally thick covering of coarse black hair. On Leon's face, too, the same black coarse hair later grew. His hairline extended almost to his eyebrows. His appearance at times was horrible. From the ears and nostrils likewise issued hairs of abnormal length, hue, and circumference. Myra cut the hair and jerked the hair out by its roots every morning when she bathed Leon, but new hair sprang forth every day.

Gene became morose at nights, and it was not unusual

for him to stay in town until late, not getting home until twelve or later. Myra went about her household duties in silence when Gene was there, and many times she went out to the market remaining much longer than was necessary to buy their food. Yet at night, when they were in bed alone, they were supremely happy. Then, for an hour or so, if the baby did not cry, they were happy as they once had been.

Frequently Myra cried for a long time before she could sleep. She never told Gene why she cried, nor did he ask her; yet they knew, each of them. After several weeks it became habitual with Myra, and Gene became accustomed to hearing the pathetic sobs shaking her body. Gene attempted to comfort her, telling her they would soon be able to live without sorrow; yet he knew in his heart that they would always be without complete happiness until Leon became well, or died.

There were moments in Myra's life when the tension in her mind became so taut she could not keep from shrieking at the top of her voice. Yet there was never any physical pain.

And Gene began to swear at Myra on rainy days.

XIX.

Chapter Nineteen

"WHAT makes his hands and feet jerk in that ungodly way?" Gene shouted ruthlessly at Myra unable to restrain himself any longer. "Why do his eyes pop like they was coming out? What's that black hair all over him for?"

Myra fell across the bed crying hysterically. She knew Gene would eventually ask the very questions he was now asking, and he knew the answer as well as she. It was useless, she reasoned, to try to hide the truth any longer. Both of them knew something was wrong. Gene let his body sink into the chair by the window. Blankly he gazed into the street below. It was filled with playing children.

Little Leon was now nearly two years old, and, while his body had lengthened, his skin was still loose and dry and, most important of all, he could not coordinate the movements of his body. Still he required the same attention from

his mother as he did when he was a week old. He was horrible to look upon, even through the eyes of his mother and father.

Leon reminded Gene of a two-headed baby he once saw in a glass jar among the freaks in a carnival. The image to him was photographically clear-cut and bold. His son was larger in the sense that his body was longer, but otherwise they were alike.

Being Sunday, Gene found his hat and left the flat without saying where he was going or when he would return.

No sooner had Gene slammed the door behind him than did Myra, drying her tears, run to the little room in which little Leon lived. She brought him to her chair by the window, holding him tenderly in her arms. The chair was warm still with the heat from Gene's body.

Myra held Leon's head in the bend of her arm, holding it tightly lest he injure his neck with his constant jerks. Sitting there, looking down into the street below where the children played Myra talked to her son. She told him stories which she had learned by heart for him long before he had been born. And again she talked to him with the same modulation of her voice she used in talking to adults. There was no response to her tales of fairies and princesses and Jack the Giant Killer, and Little Red Riding Hood.

The child lay in her arm, jerking his body. The eyes rolled up and down and from side to side, and the mouth was unable to hold its secretions. Still, Myra was happy. She loved her son dearly.

Again that afternoon, when Gene did not come back for dinner, Myra held Leon in her arms while she sat by the window. She told him stories this time of her own childhood. She told him in detail of the little brown hen her mother gave her, and how she used to hide her under her coat when she went to bed at night so the little hen could sleep with her. Myra told him about her dolls, their names, and the place in her heart for them. She told him of her playmates at school, and how they used to play together on Saturday mornings. Myra opened her heart to her son, sharing all her secrets with him. She told him of her plans for him, her ambitions, her hopes for him.

And all the time she talked to him, little Leon was jerking his head, his arms, his legs pathetically. He was vomiting his food on her new dress, and scratching her skin with the coarse black hairs which protruded from all parts of his body. When she held him tightly against her breasts, she was reminded of the red plush sofa at home with its horsehair padding.

Gene came home late that night, going immediately to bed. His clothes smelled of whiskey.

When Myra finished feeding Leon and changing his clothes she went to bed, but Gene was fast asleep. It was the first night since they had been married that Gene had failed to kiss her good-night, and she lay awake till morning crying inaudibly.

XX.

Chapter Twenty

"IS the kid getting any better?"

"He's just about the same, Gene. The doctor says if he doesn't get better soon he'll have to take him away."

"What for?"

"I don't know. . . . Unless he means he'll never get well and strong."

"Hell."

"That's what he said the last time he was here to see him, Gene."

"What'll he do with him?"

"He didn't say. . . . But I'm afraid he'll not have him taken care of properly. That's why I don't want him to take Leon away—and—I was reading in a book at the library the other day about babies that never get well, and it said they had to . . . to kill babies sometime that never get well and strong."

Tears covered her face, falling on her hands.

"Hell."

"You won't let them take little Leon away, will you, Gene?" Myra begged. "You wouldn't let them take little Leon away from me . . . and . . . do something to him, will you, Gene?"

"Hell."

"I don't want to live if they take him away like that, Gene."

"Aint he ever going to get well?" Gene asked uneasily.

"I'm afraid not. . . . The doctor says there's not much of a chance for him. I suppose he knows, don't you?"

"I guess he ought to know what he's talking about. That's his business."

"Boo-hoo — boo-hoo — boo-hooooo — Gene! Let's go away before they come and take little Leon away," Myra begged. "I can't stand it any longer. . . . I can't let them take little Leon away . . . and never see him again! Gene!"

"Aw, stop crying—that won't do no good. Hell."

"Why," she implored between sobs choking her, "why did it have to be like this, Gene?"

"God! I don't know, hon. . . . Let's have another kid. Maybe it won't be like this one. Don't you want to have another one, hon?"

"I asked the doctor about that, Gene . . . and he said it might be just like little Leon . . . maybe even worse. . . ."

"Hell."

"He said I shouldn't have any more children."

"Hell. What did he say that for? Why can't we have no more, hon?"

"He said there was something wrong somewhere. . . . I guess it's me . . . it's not your fault, Gene, dearest!"

"Hell. That's funny. . . . Hell."

"Let's go away before they come and take little Leon away from us, Gene. I'd die if I didn't have him. I love him more than anything else in the world, next to you, Gene. I couldn't live—I don't want to live unless little Leon is with me all the time. You won't let them come and take him away, will you, Gene? They'd take him away and . . . and kill him, Gene! Gene, please don't let them take my precious baby away from me! Gene, let's go away before they come back. Can't we go away, Gene? Can't we, Gene? Can't we?"

"Hell."

XXI.

Chapter Twenty-one

FIX the kid up and I'll take him over in the park. The fresh air might help him a little."

"Leon? You're going to take little Leon to the park, Gene?"

"Sure. Fix him up," he told her.

Myra dressed Leon in his best clothes, tying on his cap securely and carefully wrapping around him the pink blanket. While Myra waited for Gene to comb his hair she wondered what was the cause of his sudden desire to take the child out in public. He had never done it before now.

They went away, leaving Myra alone in the flat for the first time. Gene did not say when they would return, yet Myra was certain it would be within an hour because she did not believe Gene could stand the humiliation any longer than that. After they had gone she sat down and wrote to her sister Susan, asking her all about her husband

and baby, her new home, and scores of other things which came to her mind as she wrote. It was the first time Myra had written to her sister since leaving home with Gene.

With Leon in his arms Gene wandered aimlessly through the park. He walked slowly, for the baby soon became heavy in his arms, and he stopped frequently to rest. Several times Leon made a series of unintelligible sounds, but not once did he cry. If he had cried, at least cried continuously, Gene would have taken him home immediately.

At the end of several hours of aimless wandering through the by-paths of the park Gene sat down on a bench by the side of a stream. He placed little Leon on the seat beside him, being careful that he would not fall to the ground. Then he lit a cigarette. And while he smoked he thought of Myra, and watched the water flow past the bench down the little brook.

Gene got up presently and looked at his watch. It was almost five o'clock, yet it was still warm, and the sun had not set. He sat down again. The movements awoke him from his reveries. Consciously he asked himself if he should continue to keep Myra tied down to the flat with Leon. He felt sorry for her because he loved her. They could not always live as they lived now—before he would stand for that he would leave. But it was Myra, more than

he, for whom he was worried. She was drying up, and he did not want her to dry up and become a hag with whom nobody could live.

Leon would never get well. He was certain of that. If he lived to be twenty or thirty years old he would still be without enough sense to sit in a chair without being tied there. And Myra would have to wash diapers for another lifetime. He shuddered at the thought.

The brook-water, clear and bluish, was deep in the bed of the stream. At one place, where the water had been damned by a dead limb, it was at least two feet deep. Gene went over to the little pool and looked at the bluish water meditatively. On the bottom there was a rubber ball. Further up, at the foot of the miniature waterfalls, lay the arms and feet of a doll. The head had been broken off, and it lay face upward near by.

Gene glanced at Leon lying on the bench. He was making no sounds.

Gene kicked some gravel into the water with the toe of his shoe, unemotionally watching the stones strike the calm surface of the bluish cold water. The swelling circles spread on the water, and intermingled in undecipherable designs.

"Is that your kid, mister?"

Gene swung around startled at the high-pitched sounds. He found the path filled with small boys, urchins of all ages, sizes and colors.

"What?" Gene scowled ill-humoredly.

"Is that your kid?" the leader shouted again. "He's having a fit, ain't he? Come here and look at his face, it's all funny looking."

"Get the hell away from here!" he said, charging among them, swinging his fists at their heads. "Beat it before I get the cops on you!"

Gene ran to the bench, twisting Leon's head so he could get a good look at his face. The child's tongue was hanging from his mouth like a panting dog's. His face was contorted and purple.

The gang of boys fortified themselves behind some trees a hundred yards away.

"What's the matter with your kid, mister?" the same brown-faced urchin yelled at the top of his voice. "He looks like he's nuts. Why don't you kill him?"

"Get the hell away from here," Gene thundered threateningly, scooping up a double handful of stones. "Clear out before I get the cops on you."

He pelted them with rocks until they were out of sight. Then he went back to Leon wondering what he could do.

He had never seen the baby look like that before. Myra had not told him about Leon having fits.

Gene glanced around him, up the path and down. The child stirred feebly in his arms.

It was becoming late. The shadows lengthened each time his watch ticked in his vest pocket. Myra would be waiting supper for them. She would probably have supper ready, and would pretend to be angry because the meal had to wait for him until it was cold.

Hastily Gene ran up the path toward home. Leon, he thought to himself, must be hungry after being out so long without his bottle. He should have asked Myra for one before they left. He hurried across the street toward the flat and Myra.

Myra was waiting in the doorway when they reached the landing. Leon weighted him down. The child weighed fifteen pounds.

"What made you and Leon so late?" Myra asked breathlessly, stretching out her arms for Leon. "If I had known you would be away this long I'd have given you a bottle for Leon. Is muvver's little man hungry? Why were you gone so long, Gene?"

"Hurry up. I'm hungry as hell. We must have walked ten miles in the park."

XXII.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE next Sunday afternoon Gene said he was going to take Leon to Fairmount Park again. Myra was delighted. Quickly she dressed the child to have him ready when Gene came out the bedroom. If he had to wait very long he would more than likely change his mind about going.

Myra was waiting at the door with Leon in her arms when Gene came out putting on his coat.

"Shall you be gone this time as long as you were last Sunday, Gene?" she inquired cautiously when he took Leon in his arms.

"I don't know. Maybe so," he said casually.

"Then you should take this along," she said, slipping a bottle of milk and an extra nipple in his coat pocket. "Give it to little Leon at four. And be sure he doesn't get cold, Gene. Keep the blanket wrapped around him all the time."

Opening the door, Myra stood aside.

"Now, don't forget to give little Leon his bottle at four, Gene," she reminded, brushing his coat sleeve with her fingers.

Bending over Myra he kissed her lips three times, his lips clinging to hers.

"So long," he said, looking at her for a moment.

Hesitantly he went down the steps, turning around to look at her.

"What you going to do while we're gone?"

"Me? Oh, nothing much. I may write to Susan if I have time. Why?"

"Oh, I just wanted to know—take it easy, hon. Hell, there ain't no use in killing yourself working all the time. So long, hon. . . ."

"Good-bye, Gene—and little Leon. Don't you men stay out too late."

'So long, hon. . . ."

Myra waved to them until they were out of sight.

After idling for an hour or more along the way they reached the bench by the brook. As on the Sunday before, the brook water was cold and bluish looking.

Time dragged. The passing of the afternoon hours became slower and slower each time Gene took out his watch

and studied its face. He was restless. He could have taken Leon and gone elsewhere, but another place would be just as tiresome. Very few people passed the bench. No children appeared.

Faithfully Gene gave Leon the bottle at four as Myra had directed. At five he was sleeping soundly. Gene went over to the bench for the empty bottle. He put it in his pocket. When he went back to the water he took it out and suddenly grabbed it by its neck and threw it toward the brook. The bottle fell into a growth of briars, young trees and vines, noiselessly, unbroken.

Gene waited several minutes expecting to hear the sound of breaking glass, but that sound never reached his ears. The water gurgled in the stream before him.

It was becoming chilly. Gene pulled the blanket around his son and turned up his own coat collar. The air was damp, too. Night was falling fast. Through the shaggy-limbed trees he could see the twinkling of the park lamps. A park policeman strolled past a hundred feet away.

Myra would have the supper waiting for them, Gene thought to himself, walking hurriedly up the path with Leon sleeping in his arms. She would probably have for supper roast beef and plenty of brown gravy. She made the best gravy he had ever eaten. Myra was all right. She was

clean. All the other women he had ever known were dirty, even his mother.

Gene found a taxi.

"Drive into town."

But Myra was clean. She was a nice kid. They didn't come any cleaner than Myra.

"Say," Gene shouted at the driver, "have you got a wife?"

The man jammed on his breaks, drawing to the curb.

"What?" he asked, sticking his head through the door.

"Have you got a wife?"

"Sure, I've got a wife—only I don't call her that."

"What you call her?"

"I call her lots of things, most of them dirty."

"Is she dirty?"

"She's rotten—stinks. She's a two-timer."

"I got a clean one."

"The hell you have!"

"The cleanest one there is."

"Say, there ain't no clean ones. All of 'em are dirty. Say —where do you want to go?"

"Straight in."

The streets fell behind, like a calendar running back-

ward. Myra was clean, by God. All the rest of 'em are dirty, though.

"Third."

Gene hurried down the street, being careful not to disturb Leon. He was still sleeping soundly. The fresh air had helped him some. But Myra was clean, by God. They didn't come any cleaner than she was. The others were dirty, though. All of them.

It was dark and desolate along the waterfront. Lights from the Jersey side sparkled indifferently on the crests of sluggish waves. Distantly came the rumbling sounds of automobiles on bumpy streets. Overhead a string of clanging cars sped on the elevated, rocking the earth till the world chattered its teeth. . . . . .

. . . . . .

Below in the wet darkness the water lapped endlessly. A chunk of water-logged driftwood bobbed nervously at Gene's feet. In the river, masts and lights were nailed against the sky, and somewhere somebody laughed foolishly from the base of his throat. . . . . .

. . . . . .

Gene hurried up the steeply inclined cobblestreet until he came to a lighted restaurant. It was nine-thirty by the fly-specked clock on the wall. Two sailors had a couple of

women at a table. One of the seamen was snoring. His feet were on the table, and from his breast pocket a green railway ticket was falling. The girls were tickling the other man under his arms, trying to make him say something. He got mad, hitting one of the women with his fist. She didn't care. She hit him with her fist. He knocked her hat off her head. She hit him between the legs with her fist. The other sailor woke up, spitting on the floor.

It was ten by the fly-specked clock on the wall.

Gene paid his sixty cents and the girl smiled at him from behind her mountainous breasts.

XXIII.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THERE was a light in Myra's window. Gene could see her shadow from the street below. She was sitting in a rocking chair moving to and fro in steady, patient movements. On the window sill was an empty milk-bottle refracting a glistening, star-like light from its polished surface.

Gene leaned his body against a tree on the other side of the street and watched the window. He wondered how long she would sit there waiting, and rocking to and fro. It was already after eleven.

. . . I guess she'll get over it all right and not think about it too much. She can go back to Lewisville, and her folks will treat her good. Maybe she can find a man who'll treat her good. God! but it was a shame the way she was living. Never going out none and always having to fool around with the kid. She ought to have a good time. Now

she won't have to bother all the time about the kid. Hell, the poor kid'd died if she'd stayed up in that damn flat much longer—never going to no more movies or nothing. Hell, I guess I done right. I couldn't gone away and left her and the kid up there. But, hell, now she can go away and not have to fool around with him all the time from daylight to midnight. Maybe she can have some kids what'll turn out right. Jesus, it was God damn funny about him. . . .

Myra still sat by the window, rocking to and fro. Once while Gene was watching the window from the curb Myra got up and, opening the window, looked down into the street. Gene stepped back in the tree-shadow.

Later he went down the street to a restaurant for something to eat. He would try to get something to drink, too. Just enough to warm his hands and feet.

When he came back it was after midnight. Nearly one o'clock by his watch. The shadow was still moving to and fro. Gene hoped she wouldn't sit up all night, yet he knew she would.

. . . Hell, I bet the poor kid don't go to sleep for a week. She'll go out looking in the morning, and then she'll get the cops out looking all over the park. I wish I had a way of telling her it ain't no use to look. But if I'd let her know

how it was, she'd go nuts. I guess I'd better lay low, and maybe she'll give up pretty soon. She won't give up for a month, though, I bet. She'll walk over every inch of the whole God damn park looking before she quits. Hell, the poor kid. . . .

Gene walked slowly around the block. He did not intend walking around the block, for he left to get on a street car at the corner. But he did not stop at the corner. He walked till he was back before the window once more. The shadow continued to move to and fro, even a little faster than it moved at eleven o'clock. He wanted Myra to open the window again and look down in the street. It was she he wanted to see, not her shadow.

A policeman walked slowly up the street. Gene turned away, walking slowly, and looking back at the window over his shoulder hoping Myra would look down into the street once more. The policeman, seeing him, walked faster, and Gene hastened around the corner to the street car.

Myra came to the window, and stood with her hand against her throat looking down into the street below, an hour after Gene had turned the corner and hastened to the street car a block away.

THE END